

on spec

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Soup's On © Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

The 2008 Aurora Awards!

The Aurora is a fan-voted award for excellence in the Canadian SF community. *On Spec* is eligible for Aurora awards for writing, art, as well as the "Best Achievement in English-Other" category. Canadian readers are invited to **nominate us** and their favourite *On Spec* stories and artists (nominating is free). Bookmark the new official Aurora website at **www.prixaurorawards.ca** where you can nominate on-line, or download the printable nomination form: www.prixaurorawards.ca/English/AwardProcess/nominating.html

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A Happy New Year

Susan MacGregor, Fiction Editor

I think it was Heraclitus who first said, "The only constant is change." Since Heraclitus was also known as the 'weeping philosopher', maybe the changes he saw in ancient Greece didn't do much to make him happy. For us at *On Spec*, this year heralds a great new addition to our *On Spec* family, as well as several new initiatives for 2008.

First and most importantly, I want to welcome our new Fiction Editor, Barb Galler-Smith to our editorial collective. At the PureSpeculation convention (www.purespec.org) held here in Edmonton last October, Barb 'volunteered' herself as an editor. Since Diane and I have known Barb for years, we took her up on her offer before she could change her mind. Barb is already hard at work for the magazine, planning the promotion for our upcoming Youth theme issue. Ironically, the last Youth issue we published was the one I cut my teeth on as an editor, nearly fifteen years ago.

Barb comes to us with a wealth of writing experience. Her most recently published works can be found in the anthologies *Women Writing Science Fiction As Men* ("Better Than Ants") (2003), *New Voices in Science Fiction* ("Aphrodite on a Bar Stool") (2003), and *In the Outposts of Beyond* ("The Sleazy Banana Bar" with James A. Hartley) (2003). When I asked her how she felt about joining the magazine, she said: "I can honestly say that from the first moment I saw *On Spec* magazine years ago, some secret part of me wanted to be a part of it. Now, I'm honored and thrilled to be

allowed to do my small bit for a magazine that sets the standard for Canadian Speculative fiction. I'm proud to be associated with a group of editors who repeatedly have demonstrated they know good writing and good story-telling when they see it. And now, all of me is jumping up and down in delight squealing "wow-o-wow-o-wow"! I look forward, with happy anticipation, to reading submissions for 2008's Youth Issue to see what young people will write about, and the new ways they'll find to tell those stories."

We're delighted to have you with us, Barb. Welcome to the family.

The Youth Issue, which Barb will soon be promoting, is slated to be our Fall 2008 Issue. We hope to encourage young writers to submit work to us by the May 31, 2008 deadline. There will be two age categories for submissions: the first will be for writers between the ages of 15 and 18, and the second will be for writers between the ages of 19 and 23. From each category, a first place winner will be chosen. Both winners will have their stories featured on our front and back covers, and they'll earn a prize of \$250.00 each. Other successful candidates' stories will receive an Honorable Mention in the contest; Honorable Mention writers will be paid at our current rates. (*See the ad on Page 108 of this issue for more info.*)

Other changes for 2008? In our home-based town of Edmonton, Greenwoods' Bookshoppe (7925 104 Street) has kindly agreed to host an *On Spec* Story Night for us. Story Night will showcase some of our best short fiction from whatever happens to be our most current issue. We're in the process of determining the dates for this event, and hopefully, there will be more than one. If you'd like to attend an entertaining evening of great readings, munchies, and schmoozing (come on out and meet us if you haven't already), then watch for this event. We'll be advertising Story Night on our website and at the bookstore. I am also in the process of setting up a promotional e-mail list, so if you'd like to be placed on it and stay informed about upcoming Story Night dates, contact me at the magazine at onspec@onspec.ca. Please put 'Story Night E-Mail List' in the subject line.

Have you ever wanted to become more closely involved with *On Spec*, but haven't known how to go about it? We would like to set up Story Nights elsewhere in Canada (and beyond), so here's a chance for any of you who might like to become part of our small family circle. If you'd like to work with us and host an *On Spec* Story Night in your own city or town, then send us an e-mail and let us know. (Please forgive any tardy response on my part—I don't get into the office as often as I should as I do most of my *On Spec* work at home. I do promise though, that once I get your query

from the office, I will contact you so that we can discuss plans more directly). Steve Mohn, my fellow editor in Montréal, has also suggested that if there is anyone in the Montréal area who is interested in setting up a Story Night, they can contact him. Initially, though, please get in touch with us through the magazine's e-mail. And again, to make things run a little more smoothly, please type in 'Story Night in Canada' (or instead of Canada, whatever town or city in which you happen to reside) in the subject line.

Also returning in 2008 will be "The ABC's of How NOT to Write Speculative Fiction" writing workshops. These workshops, based on my book, offer a multitude of reasons as to why we don't accept the majority of manuscripts we receive. I hate to admit it, but the numbers we reject are quite high—we decline about 90% of the stories sent to us. I realize this makes us sound like a bunch of annoyingly picky editors, but many of the errors I've seen are those that are commonly made over and over again. If you've submitted work to us and have wondered why we rejected it, then The ABC's might offer you a deeper insight than what we tell you on our rejection sheets. These workshops enjoyed a good turn-out in Edmonton last year. As well as Story Night, Greenwoods' Bookshoppe is also hosting these workshops; we'll be setting the workshop dates shortly. Currently, The ABC's are on the shelves and for sale at Greenwoods', so the book can be purchased through them or through us at the magazine.

I'm looking forward to the changes that the new year brings. On behalf of all of us at *On Spec*, thank you for supporting us for yet another year. Without you as readers, writers, subscribers, and supporters, we wouldn't continue. May the new year result in great and welcome changes for you. All the best to you in 2008. •

Join *On Spec* on Facebook

Ever wanted to see what some of the *On Spec* people look like behind their bylines? Now you can—literally! Those of you on Facebook are encouraged to visit *On Spec*'s group page by searching '**I Read On Spec**' at www.facebook.com.

Join our social networking community, add your 2 cents to the discussion boards, discover calls for submissions and contests that didn't make it into the magazine, or just share your own cool links with other SF fans—**social networking is fun!**

Mae wondered what kind of life he'd lead out on the Vast Plains. His life started in blood, slaying his mother as he slid kicking from her womb. Would it end the same way?

Daystar

Sarah Carless

The featureless expanse of the Vast Plains stretched out before her like an endless blanket of grass. Mae felt exposed. She'd lived all her life nestled to the side of the mountain range, under its protective shadow, between its sturdy feet of rock. Now, walking out under nothing but the crushing amount of sky above her, the only shadows were her own, her donkey Myrtle's, and that of the boy.

She could scarcely believe that it had been a mere month since the boy was born. After just one week, the centaur infant was able keep pace with her, even though he still cried and reached for her milk every few hours. *So much like a human and yet so much unlike us, too*, Mae thought. He'd liked it when she rode Myrtle rather than led her through the mountain pass and down the roads that wound through the foothills. Mae had wondered if some instinct made him more comfortable around hardened hooves than booted feet. Maybe it just made her look more like something he could call mother.

The boy's blood mother had died in the birthing, which was no small wonder. Not many human women could withstand the kicking and the mass of a centaur child. The young woman had come to them in the throes of labour, and had died before she could name the sire or the clan the babe belonged to, or even herself. There was nothing

for it but for one of the priestesses to wet-nurse him and bring him to the Vast Plains, and do what she could to find a clan of centaurs to take him, and quickly. A centaur child is a wilful and wild thing, and a life among those so different from him would be a cruel one.

The number of likely candidates for the task was limited in their small mountain village, but Mae was the right age, healthy, and not afraid of travel. They'd given her a supply of mother's weed to chew, and although it tinged her teeth blue, it brought forth milk enough to feed a growing boy. She feared it might not be enough, however. A centaur dam must produce a gallon of milk a day, the way the boy drank. He grew too quickly for her, and had a hunger she was hard-pressed to keep up with. He grew strong while she lost the plushness from her cheeks and the softness of her figure. They had reached the Plains, yet there was no telling how long it would be before a centaur scouting party spotted them, and she worried she would run out of the blue leaves before she could relinquish him to his own kind. Already she was chewing more than she'd been taught to.

She felt a pull on her leg and heard a soft whimper. She looked down at him from Myrtle's back. "Lunchtime already?" His chubby fingers grasped towards her. She'd been warned about the frequent feedings, and had expected to feel more irritation than she did. She actually looked forward to it, although at first it brought into sharp focus the empty space in her abdomen where no child of her own would ever grow. The boy filled her world now, though. She climbed down, hobbled her mount, and sat on the grass, opening her arms and her blouse to the hungry child. *Babe*, she corrected herself. *He looks a human child, but is still a wee infant not yet a month old.*

Lunch over with, she smiled to see the young centaur caper beside Myrtle, who simply watched him with disinterest. Mae wondered what kind of life he'd lead out on the Vast Plains. His life started in blood, slaying his mother as he slid kicking from her womb. Would it end the same way? She wished she could tell him tales of his kinfolk, but she knew none that were appropriate for such innocent ears. The centaurs were a rare and wild people; what tales persisted of them were those best told to rowdy, drunken pub-dwellers or snickering adolescent boys. But then, she had to admit, the only tales she knew of her own people were similarly bloody, or bawdy, or both. Nobody told stories of men doing nothing. They told only of those who went off to find glory.

It was likely, she thought, that centaurs were not much different in that respect; she hoped that was true. Why should any in the civilized lands repeat a dull tale of a centaur who lived peacefully, kept his gods, married well, and had strong children who brought him joy?

She chose a spot to settle within sight of the foothills, and of the mountains beyond them; a dark purple band on the impossibly flat horizon. She couldn't bear the thought of straying too far, but she had an excuse to stay where they could still feel the wind from the pass. It harnessed the wind and channeled it, pushing it through to breathe on the Vast Plains continually. The grass always moved here, waving and rippling like an ocean.

The Temple Mother had given her instructions to go with a frame of light wood, a pale thin skin, some string, some thread, and a bag of smooth glass shards. They were old yet clear, and their sides were well-worn with use. Now that her spot was chosen and her tent erected, she lay out all the items in front of her and tried to recall how to put them together. The journey, the mother's weed and the babe's hunger had all conspired to weaken her, so it took several tries to get the skin stretched over the frame and laced tightly. By the time it was done, she had to rest and drink, waiting for her breath to return and her brow to dry. She watched the little one give chase to a cricket, and had to laugh as the bug surprised him by jumping right into his face. He squealed and ran to her, and she let him bury his face in her arms and find comfort there.

She murmured calming words to him and stroked his hair, and before long he was off again, stalking a cream-coloured butterfly. Her heart grew heavy as she watched him, but she returned to her work. Duty called. Using the thread, she bound the glass shards to the frame until it winked and tinkled constantly. She fastened the string as she'd been told, stood up, and waited for a good gust of wind.

She could see the wind before it reached her: the long, spring-green grass obligingly bent flat, heralding the gust. When it hit, she threw the kite, and it sailed upwards like a sealess ship. Gradually, she let out the string, watching it go ever higher, blinking and flashing.

"They will know what it means," Mother Rill had said. "It's an old custom, but not forgotten. They will see it and know to come."

It's so beautiful, she thought. It twinkles like a star, even in daylight. And she hated it. They'll see it, and come take her boy away. *The boy.*

Not hers. Just a boy. *Just a babe.* She had a duty to fulfill. She hardened her heart as much as she was able and let the kite fly, but she hoped it would not be seen.

He delighted in the flatness of the plains. He ran hard and fast, just for the sake of it, and ran so far Mae's heart caught in her throat, and she yelled for him until he came tearing back to her, perplexed by her fierce hug and relieved tears, yet pleased with himself all the same.

Although it taxed her, she kept her milk flowing and fed the ravenous babe as often as he asked for it. He drank of her and grew, and she cinched her belt a little tighter each morning and had to keep pulling up her stockings over the course of the days. She chewed her mother's weed, sat by her small fire, murmured her daily devotions, watched the boy play, and hated the kite, the day-star, the thing that stood sentry over them while they waited for the end of their time together.

They slept curled around one another in the tent as the day-star hung in the sky above them, the only clue to its presence being the tinkling of the glass shards, invisible in the night sky. She liked the night, when the kite's message slept in darkness. Without the shadow of the mountains, however, dawn came too early, and the day-star awoke and flashed and called out to the boy's kin to come and find them.

It was in the afternoon of the ninth day that they finally came, during her devotions. Mae had just gotten used to the routine of waiting, and was actually starting to enjoy sleeping under so many stars when they came thundering up out of the grasses wearing nothing but flowers and feathers. As flat and featureless as the Plains were, it played tricks on the eyes, and the constant rippling of the waist-high grass hid movement well. She did not notice the newcomers until she heard them, and it was the boy that heard them first. Curious, he'd stood stone-still, looking north-west. She'd strained her eyes to see what he did, yet saw nothing but the endless waves of green. When the centaurs came upon them, the boy hid behind her, though in truth she felt she should hide behind him.

At first, Mae feared that they'd sent an army, but a small party of centaurs were simply louder than anything she'd expected. There were only three of them, but they made noise enough for fifty, she thought. They drew up close. They all had long tangled hair, muscled bodies and a clean, wind-swept look to them. Two carried spears, and one, the middle one, carried a woven grass basket. The middle one's

features were finer and softer than the other two. It took Mae a moment to recognize that this breastless being was female. Her chest was as flat and hard as those of her companions. Mae did not want to give up the infant to someone so obviously incapable of caring for him.

The sheer size of horses had always intimidated Mae, and these people were larger, stronger, and exuded a musky aura of clean sweat and good health. Their muscles were defined, even on the female, and their spines—that which lay in the human half—stood straighter and more erect than those of her own kind. Adorned with nothing much more than feathers and blossoms, they cut an imposing sight.

“Bey No Pah, Ni Nah, Ti Fa Mat,” the centaur woman said. Her voice was almost as deep and strong as any human man’s.

Mae was afraid of this. She spoke no language other than Thalisian. There was little call for much else in her village, or her Temple. Her hesitation spoke volumes, though.

“It means *Snow on Grass*, Wise Woman, Flat Run Clan,” the centaur said. “It is my name.” Her accent was thick, but Mae was simply glad she spoke Thalisian at all. Bey No Pah gestured to her companions.

“Ta Tey Fo Na, Ti Fa Mat” one of the centaur men said, shaking his hair back proudly. Mae started at the deepness and volume of his voice. She thought she felt it in her belly rather than heard it with her ears.

“*Odd Light Before the Storm*, Flat Run Clan,” Bey No Pah supplied.

The last stepped forward. “*Sey Wa Fal, Ti Fa Mat.*”

“*Dust of Quick Running*, Flat Run Clan.” Bey No Pah looked at Mae expectantly.

She tripped over her own tongue before she could get the words out. “Mae of Thalisia, Healing Hand of Viatorel.” She sounded silly and small to her own ears. It made her feel too young to be out here on her own, even though she was a grown woman.

“You fly a peace kite,” the woman said. She looked at Mae’s young charge. “I can see why.”

Mae twisted to look at him, the boy who cowered behind her. For all his bravado charging around the Plains, he really wasn’t all that brave when strangers appeared. She stroked his head and smiled when he looked up at her. “His mother died in his birthing,” Mae said.

The woman stepped forward, scuffing the grass with her hooves. The men hung back, crude javelins held loosely in their hands. “What

is his name?"

Mae's smile faded. She'd been told not to name him at all. Centaurs, Mother Rill had said, hung great importance on names. Each could recite his ancestry back to the first ones, so they claimed. Their histories and identities were bound in their names. Mother Rill had cautioned her to let the centaurs name him. Better that than name the child something silly or insulting, however unintentional.

"His mother died," Mae said again. Her tongue felt thick and dry, difficult to work under the heavy stare of the centaurs and the weight of so much open sky. She longed to feel solid rock under her feet again, rather than spongy soil. "She did not name him," she finished. "She passed on before she could."

A slight look of impatience crossed the centaur woman's face. "What was her name, then?"

Mae had to fight the instinct to look at the ground like a naughty child. *I am a Priestess of Viatorel, she reminded herself. My healing hands are sought after by all, and I tend to all. Including orphaned centaurs.* "She was brought to us while in labour, by strangers who didn't know her name. She died before she could give us anything, about her or the child's father, or his clan. We know nothing about him, about any of them."

Bey No Pah spoke a few strange words to the men who accompanied her, and they stomped their hooves and tossed their heads and spat out harsh syllables. Mae tried not to quail before them, although her insides turned to water. She stood her ground. She had done everything she could for the boy, and she murmured soothing words to him and held his torso against hers.

Bey No Pah turned back to her, after quieting her companions with a sharp look. "He has an unfortunate beginning, but nothing that cannot be overcome. What do you call him? You must use *something*."

A lightning-strike of guilt stabbed her. She'd been explicitly told not to name him anything, and she'd been bound by duty to obey. Most often she used endearments like "little one," or "sleepyhead," or "dearheart." She dared not insult the giants in front of her by having a name for her donkey but not the boy she'd spent the last month caring for. A bright flash in the sky caught her attention. The kite still flew.

"Daystar," she said, grasping onto the image. She pointed to the kite. "It shines like a star in the day," she explained. "And it called his

people to him. And..." she looked at the boy, still clutching her side and eyeing the strangers but not without open curiosity. She folded back a lock of hair from his face, and finally spoke truth. "And as bright as the days are out here on the Plains, he makes them brighter."

Bey No Pah considered this a moment, then nodded, smiling. "Pi Van," she said. "*Star of Day*."

"Pi Van," repeated Ta Tey Fo Na with approval.

"Pi Van," said Sey Wa Fal.

Bey No Pah kneeled, an awkward pose for a centaur, and held her hand out to the boy, to Daystar. "Pi Van, *Ti Fa Mat*," she said.

Daystar looked at Mae uncertainly, but she forced a smile and nodded, encouraged him to take the hand of the centaur woman. Her face felt as if it would shatter to pieces under her skin, but she smiled anyway. He hesitated for a moment, but then reached out and grasped Bey No Pah's hand, and she drew him away from Mae. She whispered strange words to him, and stroked his back and nuzzled his face with hers. He responded to those gestures more than he ever had to Mae's soft kisses or gentle fingers on his cheeks, and she felt her heart fall out of her chest and land in the dirt at her feet. They'd never met him before, but they knew him better than she did. Tears burned her eyes.

Bey No Pah stood, still holding Daystar's tiny hand in hers. "You performed a great service for Pi Van, and for us. It was kind of you to give so much of yourself for a child not yours, and not of yours, either. He is healthy and strong, and we thank you."

A stab of panic speared Mae's insides; this was goodbye. No time to get to know these people, no time to get the measure of them, no time to prepare young Daystar—or herself—for the sudden separation.

"I have been nursing him," she blurted. "I've chewed mother's weed so that I could."

Bey No Pah's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Yes, we know," she said. "You have our thanks for it. Is that not enough?"

Mae felt a brief flash of anger at the question. "I'm not asking for payment," she said.

"Then what do you want?"

What did she want? "I want..." Daystar. "I want to come with you. I can feed him until you find another who can."

The wise woman of the Flat Run Clan looked at her, and Mae felt herself being assessed, weighed for her worth. Bey No Pah shook her

head. "You are weak," she said. "And your donkey is too slow."

"But the boy—"

"Will be fed. *Our way.*"

"He's never known any mother but me."

"And we will make sure he does not forget."

"He'll get scared."

"You could not keep up," Bey No Pah snapped.

Mae looked helplessly at the giant long-legged centaurs, and then at her poor, plodding Myrtle. Mae knew the centaur was right. *But they could slow down for me, if they wanted to.* One look at the imposing centaur men, however, dashed that faint hope. She might not understand their tongue, but she understood impatience. She watched them bristle.

"May I at least say goodbye?"

Bey No Pah's face softened, and stepped back without a word. She pulled her two men away a few steps. There was little privacy on the wide-open Plains, but she tried.

Mae sank to her knees and opened her arms to Daystar, who ran to her, familiar with the pose and what it meant. As he drank his fill one last time, she cradled him as much as his size and shape would allow. She whispered to him how much he'd be missed, and that he'd always have a home in her arms, and where to find her should he ever need to. He would not understand or remember, she knew, but she needed to tell him anyway.

When he finished, she wiped the last of her milk from the corners of his mouth, and, seized by a sudden whim, she nuzzled him as she'd seen Bey No Pah do. Delighted, he pushed his face back into hers and giggled. She laughed, felt it threaten to turn into sobs, and cut it short.

"Pi Van," she said, putting her hand on his warm little chest. "Pi Van, Ti Fa Mat."

He placed his own chubby hand on her chest, between her sore, spent breasts.

"Mae," she said, holding his hand there.

"Mah," he inexpertly repeated.

She laughed again, and this time did not hold back her tears. •

She ignored the warnings of her own kind that fairy and mortal just don't mix and sank into his life, determined to be indelible as ink.

Pressina's Daughters

Angela Slatter

The woman (for so she appears) sits beside a mirror.

The mirror is horizontal, lying like a large silver pool stretched across the air, floating freely with no pedestal beneath, nor chains to hold it from above. When she is not there, children of Avalon will sometimes come to play, crawling underneath to marvel at the magic that keeps the mirror hovering. But the times when she is gone have dwindled. She seems intent upon spending her eternity here, watching greedily.

Occasionally she circles the mirror, scrutinizing what she sees. When she's bored, she will dip her hands into the liquid, disturbing the show, sending ripples out to the edge like repercussions of some great act. Sometimes she turns and leaves the bower, her room without walls, constructed of forest and flowers.

She might stop, hesitate, turn back, resume her seat and wait for the surface to smooth again, for the images to coalesce into something that makes sense. The tip of her tongue is just visible between red, red lips as she leans forward in a kind of lusting, a kind of longing, watching her daughters' blighted lives.

Some days she calls up the past; happy days when she first met Helmas and they loved fiercely. Days when he was a slave to her whims

and promised everything, anything; when she, hungry for the taste of him, believed what he said. She ignored the warnings of her own kind that fairy and mortal just don't mix and sank into his life, determined to be indelible as ink.

She still dreams of him, of his body and his strength. His scent assails her nostrils in the depths of night and she weeps with want and despair. Her body responds although he has been dust for many years.

When she is angry and bitter she conjures the day he broke his oath. He did not play her for a fool with some pretty maid, setting her aside for a younger woman, but he burst into the lying-in chamber when she was giving birth to their daughters, and he saw what no mortal should.

Her shriek made his ears bleed.

As the last daughter slid from her body, she re-formed and gathered the three babies. Without another word to her hapless husband, she disappeared in flame.

They came to rest on the Isle of Glass: Avalon. She fed her daughters grief and tears, and did not stop to think it might warp them as they grew, like young trees subjected to a harsh wind.

There lies your home. If it were not for your father's perfidy we would be living there with him: a happy family.

In spite of this, she has never acknowledged any guilt on her part, for to do so might be to see that her punishment of her daughters was too harsh, too cruel, too *human*. When she thinks back to the day her daughters came to her, shining with pride, glowing with achievement, she stirs up all her righteous indignation and lets it simmer in her breast. It's the only way she can protect herself from guilt.

Mother, announced the eldest, fiery Melusine, you are avenged. Helmas has been dealt with.

We shut him up in a mountain, Mother, chimed pragmatic Melior. With his treasure, guarded by a dragon.

We did it for you, Mother, finished Palantina, the quiet one, the follower.

Their laughter was giddy, loud, and for a while the girls did not notice her sobs, until they became screams. She left them, briefly, and flickered to Armenia, to a dark cavern overflowing with silence.

A dragon curled around an enormous pile of treasure. It opened one eye, smoke puffed from its mouth. Sensing what she was, it bowed

its green-scaled head and settled back to sleep. On a bier lay Helmas, cold and stiff. Powerful though she was, she could not breathe life back into him.

Her daughters, waiting in her bower, huddled together, whispering. Had they been wrong? Had they miscalculated? When the curses came, they had their answer.

For her part Melusine would, every Sunday, sprout wings and a serpent's tail. Melior had to watch over a sparrow hawk *in aeternum*. Palantina was to guard their father's grave, and his treasure.

When the inhabitants of Avalon heard of this, they came to plead with the girls' mother. Finally, Vivienne—first among women on the Isle—prevailed upon Pressina to give the three daughters some chance of release. But malice still reigned: she gave Melusine her own burden—the need to find a husband who would keep his word and leave her be when asked. Melior must find a young knight to watch the sparrow hawk for three days and nights without falling asleep. And Palantina must wait for a descendant of either of her sisters to release her by slaying the dragon that guarded her father's treasure. If they could fulfill these conditions then, after fifteen years (which was, coincidentally, the amount of time each had lived thus far), they would be released.

They departed Avalon long ago, her daughters, but still she watches them, with grief, with envy and with a heated curiosity. Sometimes she stirs the mirror in the hope that the ripples will cause further ructions in their lives. Other times, she blows a gentle breath to freeze the surface, to catch an image, to watch a joy or a hurt for a little longer, to keep the ephemeral at bay. She jumps between past and present, feeding off their lives like a creature that licks tears from the faces of those who weep in their sleep; she cannot see the future.

• • •

1. *Melusine's Tail*

The girl is blood and snow. It is a wonder to him that she doesn't melt as she slips into the water. Her skin is the whitest he has ever seen, flawless, like vellum scraped back until preternaturally smooth, waiting for the touch of ink. He wants to be the ink that writes on her skin, turning it into a map of their experience. She submerges until only

her head and floating storm of hair are visible, a red cloud of curls and sheen. It matches exactly, he notes, what he glimpsed before she entered the water: the triangle at the apex of her thighs, a warm, inviting fire.

The sight has briefly washed memory from him. He recalls his shame only when he sees his hands and the blood that stains them. A cry escapes him, a child told that his parents aren't coming home, ever again. He hears the splash of water as she thrashes in the stream, her eyes searching the bushes to find whoever watches.

Red eyes, too, or rather light brown with a russet veil across them. In certain lights they seem red. Her lips move, one word or two, something he does not hear, but he is impelled to leave his hiding place. He rises to his feet as if pulled upward by strings. Eyes regard him, surprised, indignant, then with a blossoming interest. She rises from the water, glistening white, fluid and sinuous; he cannot move.

They exchange names. Raimond, Count of Lusignan, and Melusine. He can tell she's royalty, notwithstanding her unusual bathing habits. Blue blood knows blue blood. No peasant could be so beautiful, or gently spoken.

Helping to wash the blood off his hands, she draws his story from him; the hunting accident, his dagger slipping across the tough hide of the boar like a boot across ice, piercing his uncle's chest. A nightmare, the devil's work, his undoing. A murderer by ill-fate, not choice. His uncle's blood still stains his tunic, left behind when he clasped the dead man to him, weeping and wishing, uselessly, for it not to be so.

She speaks quietly, tugging his clothes from him and washing them in the spring. *No one else was there, no one else need know.* Her eyes are warm. *The boar killed your uncle—it is, after all, partially the truth.*

Mesmerized by her voice, her movements, the way light catches the water on her skin, he listens and believes. She spreads his clothes on a warm rock to dry and stands before him, a beautiful, troubling, persuasive work of art. *They will believe you, especially if your wife swears to it.*

He stares, slowly coming to her meaning, and nods. After all, she is the loveliest creature he has ever seen, she is a princess and he cannot imagine anyone objecting to his marrying her, not even his older brother, the Count of Forestz. She might even have a fortune to her name—his luck seems to be changing! He nods again and kneels before her, eyeing the bright red hearth fire that draws him in, helped

gently by her long, pale hands.

Only her shadow against the rock wall shows that she is losing her shape as she moves in time with his tongue; the shivering eidolon of wings, huge, flapping limbs, gives her away. She senses it, feels herself *flow*, becoming liquid, then she shudders, breathes deeply and solidifies. She will be more careful in future—when he might prove more attentive.

• • •

It was the children who betrayed her.

Raimond loved her to distraction. She brought him wealth and fame and was fertile, of that there was no question. Ten sons in ten years and still she was beautiful. She suffered none of the indignities visited on so many women of her station and time: she did not lose her husband's eye, her breasts did not sag, her body did not swell like an overfilled bladder, veins did not pattern her lovely legs.

The children, though, were not so lovely. Each one was healthy as a horse and irredeemably ugly. Of the first one they said he would either grow out of or into his looks. The second was deemed *unfortunate*. The third set tongues wagging like the tails of happy dogs. The fourth, fifth, and six began rumours of a curse. Seven, eight, nine and ten confirmed the gossip and hard eyes turned to Melusine, for surely the problem lay with her, of whom nothing was known before she married the Count of Lusignan.

She did not go to church; in fact, she was never seen on a Sunday, not even by her husband. No one had met any member of her family and yet she seemed a fabulously wealthy bride. Castles sprang up overnight, they said, whenever the mood took her. No sign of age touched her brow, although silver had gathered at her husband's temples for years.

Raimond's older brother, the Count of Forestz, heard the rumours. Soon, he began to encourage them, feeding them as one would a particularly nasty pet. Jealous of his brother's seemingly limitless wealth, of the ease with which Raimond came to his fortune — and heated with lust for his sister-in-law — he decided to pay a visit to celebrate the birth of his newest ill-favoured nephew.

Raimond spoke candidly to him. The Count listened with greedy ears and replied with bitter honey. *Raimond needed to discover where his*

wife went each Sunday. He must solve this mystery. If Melusine was in thrall to some evil, then Raimond could release her; help her by knowing the details of her plight. Raimond, eventually, was convinced.

They hid in a curtained alcove in Melusine's chamber an hour before midnight on Saturday. Troops of servants brought buckets of steaming water up the stairs from the kitchens and poured them into an enormous wooden tub, two man-lengths in circumference. When the water was a few inches from the top, the servants scuttled away and Melusine entered. She closed the door and bolted it securely, leaning her forehead against the wood, and sighing.

She turned and faced the tub, her face a work of grief and resignation. She stripped off her robe. The Count of Forestz watched her greedily, his hand busy at his groin.

As the church bells began to strike midnight Melusine approached the tub. She cried out, bent double, and threw herself into the water with a great splash. Raimond started in concern and would have rushed to his wife's aid if the Count had not restrained him with his free hand. *Watch*, he urged.

Soon the water calmed and Melusine surfaced. Her head hung like that of a wayward angel, hair covering her ageless face, and wings, far from angelic, rose from her shoulder blades as if designed by some mad architect.

Raimond parted the curtains and approached his wife. His brother, suddenly unwilling to make his hand finish its task, covered his wilted cock and shoved it back into his tights.

Under the water, Raimond saw movement, a graceful undulation like that of a great serpent. His wife's tail thrashed, breaking the surface, sending water splashing over the sides, soaking his boots. She raised her eyes, dark red with grief. Her gaze moved to the Count of Forestz, who appeared at her husband's shoulder, his eyes round, his brow slick with sweat.

The great wings stretched and beat downward, lifting her from the water. She flew past her husband and to grab his brother's throat with one hand, his genitals with the other, and jerked the withered fruit from his body. *Only five more years*, she cried plaintively to Raimond. *If only you had waited five years!*

Raimond was caught between the desire to watch his brother die, noisy and wet, a victim of his own curiosity, or his wife's flight.

Melusine won. His eyes followed her as she flew from the castle window, her bloody trophy in hand, and a cry of despair on her lips.

• • •

Fierce Melusine, most like her mother, now no more than a haunt. Her pain tastes the sweetest. She hovers about the castles she built and daydreams about her husband and children, and her lost chance of freedom. She keeps her last trophy in a box, hidden in the walls of her favourite castle. Sometimes she visits it, staring through the stones at what hides behind them, in the hollow space. Most of her time is spent in the corners of rooms, wings brushing the ceiling, invisible to all, a breeze where none should exist, a shadow with no visible source; or screaming wildly when yet another bearing her thinned blood shuffles off the mortal coil.

• • •

2. Melior and the Sparrow Hawk

The bird squawks to gain her attention and she lifts her eyes from the fat book in her lap.

The creature is a mix of gold and brown, smaller than a normal hawk but still large enough to make a mess. It regards her with hard topaz eyes and shits, quite deliberately, as she watches. Melior sighs, reaching for the bell rope to summon one of the many dwarves who serve in her underground kingdom.

‘Disgusting chicken.’

They have lived together for so many years it’s like a marriage. They are each other’s only real companion, for the dwarves are barely sentient. Most days they are friends, Melior and the sparrow hawk, but familiarity also breeds contempt.

Melior is still golden, a shining beauty, her hair white-gold, her skin shimmering as though dusted with precious metal. Her eyes are bored, hard, and bear a striking resemblance to those of her pet. In truth, she has adopted more of its habits than she would care to acknowledge: a certain sharp movement of the head when she listens, a lifting of her shoulders and a shaking of her body when annoyed, an assessing gaze, and a pursing of the lips that looks more than beak-like

at times.

The sparrow hawk stretches its wings, shudders, and flies across the room. Two dwarves enter, each bearing cloths and a bucket. They approach the perch cautiously. The sparrow hawk's eyes narrow as it swoops downward, tormenting them. They squeal and throw themselves to the floor, certain that the creature will attack them, though it never does. It settles on its golden perch and watches as they gather themselves and begin the cleaning, glancing occasionally at the bird.

Melior watches, too, her lips quirked. Just as the sparrow hawk never tires of tormenting the little men, she never tires of watching its casual cruelty. Sometimes she dangles one of them out a window, over a chasm, just to hear their screams echo off the eroded walls of the caverns. She's only dropped one, though that wasn't intentional (her hands got a bit sweaty).

Melior is very big on intent; she's never responsible if there's no intent. That's why she accepted her mother's revenge, because there was intent: Melusine was the instigator, to be sure, but Melior and Palantina had agreed, and rejoiced when Helnias fell for their trap. Everything had worked so well. Right up until they told their mother.

So here she was waiting: still waiting.

Strictly speaking, Melior doesn't need a knight of her own blood —unlike poor Palantina—but she figures they might have a better chance. Generations are needed to produce a true knight, a man with the right mixture of courage, loyalty, intelligence and a tiny sliver of stupidity.

Many a night she has spent dreaming of him, constructing in her mind this man who will rescue her. It took just a few years for the thoughts to turn erotic, alone as she is with only misshapen dwarves and the sparrow hawk for company. She has busy fingers, thinking of what this man will do to her, imagined acts that hint of incest, even though the blood is well diluted.

They are few and far between now, heroes. Blood and belief in magic are thin and the Church tells men not to entangle themselves with women such as she—far more dangerous than mortal women. Young men fear for their souls. Treasure and beauty no longer attract them. They carry rosary beads and tell them like old women, calling on God and the Saints to protect them from anything out of the ordinary. Men have *lessened*, she decides.

A sound rumbles up to meet her ears and she tilts her head, in unconscious mimicry of the sparrow hawk. It's the sound of the gates of her palace opening, creaking, grinding from lack of use. She sets aside her book and rises, slowly. Hope stirs in the dark place she has hidden it. An unfamiliar shiver that she tries to crush, for when she hopes she hurts. *They always fail*, she reminds herself. *Always*.

The sparrow hawk watches as she passes, her hand reaching out to smooth its feathers. It raises its head, pressing for a firmer caress. *It's been just us for so long*. She pauses and dips her face to the bird's. Their foreheads touch ever so briefly before she straightens and leaves the room.

In the entrance hall is a knight, staring at the little men who have led him here. He touches one of the shining statues as if to make sure it's what it seems: pure gold. Dark red hair, pale blue eyes, a fine face, and his shield bears the insignia of Lusignan. So, a nephew of sorts. She sees something of Melusine's fierceness about the mouth, but there's a softness in the pale eyes that owes nothing to his fabulous ancestress. His eyes may show his weakness, his Achilles heel—he may be too soft for this quest. He will try, though, he will try even if he is doomed to fail. She sighs as she descends the long, winding staircase and comes to stand before the young man, who bows low, well-bred.

'I'm here to save you.' His eyes are ardent and his tone sincere. Melior smiles: tired, resigned.

'Your name?' She rests her hand on his arm and leads him up the stairs.

'Raimond.'

'Named after your ancestor, no doubt.'

She is charming and he is charmed. She explains his task to him: the sparrow hawk must be watched for three days and nights during which time he must not sleep. No naps, no relief, a simple task of endurance. If he succeeds, he will gain a bride, a treasure, and become a great lord; if he fails, he will die. It's all very traditional, really. *It's nice, she says, that some traditions remain*.

She throws open the doors to the salon where the sparrow hawk waits, a sardonic look on its face. The creature eyes the knight. *Is this the best they can do nowadays?* Melior smiles at her young suitor.

'You begin now.' She gestures to a huge hourglass sitting on the floor beside the fireplace. At a wave of her hand, the device, half the

height of a man, flips over. Sand flows from the top bulb through the thin waist into the lower chamber. 'My servants will bring you food and drink every so often. When the sand runs out, your three days are up. Good luck, young man.'

'When can I see you again?'

'Not in the next three days; I have reading to do.' She picks up the large book she left on the table and smiles at him. 'But my friend will keep you company. Do try not to sleep.'

He stands close to her and she tilts her face so their lips are close. They kiss, though she breaks away as the sparrow hawk erupts, hissing displeasure. Melior laughs and sweeps from the room.

• • •

The morning of the third day finds the young man bleary eyed and cantankerous. He sways as he forces himself to walk around the room, counting, reciting poetry, making any noise he can to keep himself awake. He would, in truth, give up on this entire venture for an hour of sleep, but his life rests on the task, not simply his fortune. Thoughts of the golden woman made his cock twitch hourly for the first day, on the second day the treasure kept him awake, but now he is exhausted and only the thin thread of his continued existence keeps him from lying down to sleep.

The sparrow hawk watches him with sly interest. It has amused itself for the last two days with periodic swooping, cawing, and shitting on the hapless knight—splashes of white still stain his armour, mementos of those times when the bird left its mark. The creature has seen many of his kind come and go. It knows the signs. It is only a matter of time before this one succumbs. He has lasted longer than any other, it will give him that, but he will not make it through the last day. So it watches, no longer tormenting the man, for to do so now would be to wake him.

The knight stumbles on the edge of a carpet and falls to his knees. He tries to rise but surrenders to the pull of the floor. Lying on his back, he stares at the ceiling, wondering at the carvings above. His eyes grow heavy and he hears a sound from the sparrow hawk that may be avian laughter. Lids droop heavily and, as sleep claims him, he does not see the bird move. It leaves its perch and hops to where he lies, its steps jaunty, almost a jig.

It swells, exchanging feathers for scales, its head elongating, horns sprouting, claws expanding, a tail snaking where tail feathers alone once lay. No longer a largish bird, it's now a small dragon. But even a small dragon is enough to deal with a sleeping knight. It takes a deep breath, exhales fire, toasting the man in his metal skin. When the work is done, it caws happily and shrinks, feathers reinstating themselves, skin shivering as it changes, and returns to the perch to await its mistress.

• • •

Melior sighs at the pile of ash and misshapen metal that her ever-so-great nephew has become. She crouches and sifts a handful of grey dust through her fingers, eyeing the sparrow hawk thoughtfully. The bird preens.

'I've been thinking,' she tells it as she rises. As she touches its head, stroking the feathers gently but firmly, the bird almost coos. 'It seems my mother's curse is too strong to break, but what if I curse myself differently?'

Her stroking hand reaches the sparrow hawk's tail and, before it can react, she plucks a long feather. The bird snaps at her in indignation but her hand moves away. She laughs and approaches the table where she has laid her fat book alongside a bowl and a variety of ingredients, none of which smell good. In fact, they all look as though they were living creatures, once. The sparrow hawk watches her, head tilted to the side, as she combines them in the large golden bowl, then adds a dark liquid.

'You,' she says, 'have been the only constant in my life. You've never left me, you are always faithful. Sparrow hawks mate for life. Could I wish for anything more?'

She strikes a flint and sparks fly into the bowl, setting the liquid alight. Her hand trembles for a moment, as Melior reads from the fat book and she drops the feather into the flames.

A flash briefly blinds the sparrow hawk. He blinks and stares through the smoke, trying to make out his mistress in the gloom. A harsh noise comes, like a human using a new voice, but it sounds sweet to his ears. There's a flurry in the grey air as wings are tried and tested and a shape takes flight.

A female alights on the perch: sleek, golden, beautiful. She dips

her lovely head and rubs her beak along his neck. He responds with something like a sigh. A chorus of contentment fills the room until the ceiling reverberates and they nestle close, akin at last.

• • •

Pragmatic Melior, she thinks. Quite clever, really, if not more than a little perverse. And it's a quiet kind of revenge as well, for it would be very hard for Pressina to tell people her son-in-law eats mice and shits on the carpet.

Some days it angers her, but most of the time her fingers ache to caress the golden feathers her daughter now bears as a badge of honour, of victory.

• • •

3. Palantina and the Treasure of King Helmas

Born last,

I am the one of whom no one speaks.

Born last,

I am the lost.

Born last,

I am the sigh on the breeze,

The shadow on the wall.

I guard my father's body,
His treasure my bed,
My mother's curse an afterthought.
The third of her brood,
The shadow child.
My sisters' fates spectacular,
Mine somehow not.

Melusine and her tail,
Her children and curious husband.
Her mania for building,
The flying buttresses of her wings
Overarching her family tree,

Her cry when a branch falls.
Her rise and demise.

Melior and the sparrow hawk,
So cool
So calculating.
Her suitors all ash,
Her patience gone.
A simple spell to cure all,
And she
Happily feathered.

Silent Palantina,
Guardian of tomb and treasure,
Watching the world through
Dragon's scales.
Fading quietly,
Losing shape, colour, and breath.

I'm the leaf that blows through the cemetery,
Catches on a corpse,
Dances in a chest cavity.
I cannot escape the cage of ribs.
The rattles of my struggle fade
As I settle:
Pressina's last daughter, her silent child.

• • •

Palantina diminishes every day. Fairies exist only as long as someone remembers them, invokes them. Otherwise, they are lost.

Pressina's final child has become transparent, no epic poems or sagas tell her tale, even the dragon begins to look through her. Not a single knight has tried to breach the walls of her hiding place. One of Pressina's grandsons, Geoffrey, was going to try, but he left it too late and died. She watches as her daughter languishes, and wonders what will happen when she disappears from view. •

Quote (Cymbeline)

Gary L. Pierluigi

“The sceptre, learning, physic, must
all follow this and come to dust.”(Cymbeline)

Shaking buzzwords from your scales
we race into the rivers undertow, sweet
elixir rising bloodless into the vein
of sadness, burning soft wet flesh
unfurling, the collective rape
undressing in abandoned cars.

Copulation
adulation
spiralling around drums
of dark matter swelling
to the pagan sound.

Lanterns propelled by masses.
Brown dwarfs splayed upon rocks
of faith and governments shining where they stand.

This is the cross I shed, the sun I kiss,
the wailing of tortured children.
Under the skin is where we really live.

So yes,
I let her die,
an eternal reward softly driven.

Forgive those who teach God at deathbeds.
Thoughts out of season in the death well. •

He had no idea how to approach potentials in this day and age. It had been so much easier the first time.

Re-Annunciation

Nancy Chenier

Gabriel had a problem.

In the last forty-eight hours he had had a half-eaten cheeseburger and a can of Diet Sprite thrown at him, a dog sicced on him, a rusty meat cleaver wielded at him, five doors slammed on him, and three police reports filed against him.

The police reports were of no concern. They recorded three different descriptions, none of which bore any resemblance to the form he currently wore. But he didn't like dogs, and he still felt rattled by the whole rottweiler incident. Moreover, the solstice was fast approaching, which didn't leave him much time.

The deadline buzzed in the back of his skull, and he drowned it out by chain-drinking Amaretto sours in the only bar in town still open after two. There was no smoking allowed, but that didn't diminish the murk that oozed from the shadowy corners like swamp gas. Four teenagers lurched in the shifting lights over the scuffed square of dance floor, every now and again laughing too loudly, too self-consciously. Slumming it from the suburbs. By dawn they'd be stumbling back up front walks, hunching past the consternation of vigilant parents, spilling over next week to their classmates with glorious tales of their adventures on the East Side.

Gabriel chuckled into the sweet-sour liquor. The spirits passed fleetingly through his meta-metabolism. Intoxication was a brief vapor, kept animate by constant reinforcements. He envied the sloppy lucidity of the saggy-faced individual two booths down or the unraveling inhibitions of the dancing teens.

He had come to town with three hopefules—and thought he was being overly cautious having two whole backups. Now, he was at the end of his rope. He had no idea how to approach potentials in this day and age. It had been so much easier the first time.

• • •

Marianne went into the bar looking for action. Her long blue rain-coat gaped open, a frame for her form. The leather bodice gave her figure more exaggeration than it actually had, just as the boots gave her a few extra centimeters. The glossy leather of both matched the thick, straight drape of hair that swung halfway down her back. She paused just inside the door, sure that the pink and blue neon backlit her enough that her scrutiny of the place was veiled by her silhouette. The suburb-rats were already paired off—no big deal, they rarely had the wallets of her more mature clientele.

She'd gotten good at reading men, knew when they'd be open to play-for-cash. There was one. He looked... established and needy—the magical combination. She wondered if he might have a wife at home. The harried look around his soulful eyes bespoke oppression at home or at the office. She figured Japanese snack-bar hostess might work with him—effervescently sexy while infinitely sympathetic and adoring. *They don't appreciate all the work you do as director of the marketing department. Your contribution is vital, why can't they see that? Ooo, how do you find time to get to the gym? You must go daily, with a body like that...*

She could even manage to put on an accent if he seemed the type. It would be Chinese, but she doubted he'd be able to tell the difference. Whiteys rarely could.

Marianne waited until he looked up to time her slow cross to the bar. Kenny was bartending and had a martini ready for her. She didn't like martinis, but they held a certain sex appeal with her preferred customers, customers that might be turned off at the un-sophistication of her more fruity-sweet tastes or at the trailer-park association of a

beer. It kept her sipping cool and controlled; she could nurse a single drink all night. Besides, the olive was ever the effective prop.

Dipping her head, ostensibly toward Kenny, she let her hair fall forward so she could check on her target. Perfect. His eyes had followed her. Oh, he wanted something from her bad. It was plain as day. *I got what you need, bay-bee*, she thought. She brushed the dark veil of hair back and let her gaze fall as if haphazardly upon him alone at the booth. Her slow smile was loaded with a hopeful query. The rise of his eyebrows she took as an answer. She kept her saunter under control, sexy not junkie.

"Would you like a little company?" she said, just a hint of breathy, a bit of a slur over the Ls in case she determined to go with Asian spice.

He watched her, as if still making up his mind. Must be a wife at home.

On intuition more than deliberation, she abandoned the Asian cutie idea and gave him a more matter-of-fact tone: "You look like you could use someone to talk to." Good, yes, emphasize talk. That was the way to go. Let him get comfortable with the idea of being with you.

She chose a position across from him to start. She could lean into him from there or scoot slowly around to his side. The vinyl creaked under her garters. When he did not fill the span of silence, she said gently, "I'm Marianne."

The man's head shot up, and he stared even more pointedly at her. Oh, gods, she thought, that must be his wife's or daughter's name. She cursed herself for not going with Suki or something. Diffuse, diffuse... She cast about for levity. "Please, no Gilligan's Island references."

He smiled a bit—was it in response to her attempt at humour? It was hard to tell.

She let a hand fall across the scored varnish to brush his forearm. It was oddly cool. She studied him more carefully. His face gave the impression of age, yet there was not a single wrinkle marring the skin. It made her think of statues, but she shrugged it off. Rent was coming up; she needed this score.

This time, he leaned forward. "Can I ask you something? It's rather important." The earnestness in his smooth voice almost made her giggle.

Just then the teens started shouting something about the music. Kenny responded with a curt gesture at the hand-lettered sign behind

the bar that Marianne couldn't see from where she was sitting, but knew what it said: *Non-negotiable Music Policy—You Don't Like It, Leave.* They only got louder in their protests. Kenny was a big man. They had to have been pretty damn high to keep arguing with him.

She chanced a hand on top of his. That marble-like coolness again, but she left it there. "Maybe we should go somewhere a bit more quiet." She tried matching his creamy tone.

By the time they got to the hotel room, she was peaking and giddy. This was going to be easy. When she furtively suggested the classy heritage hotel downtown, he offered no resistance. She wondered if she could ask as much as three hundred though, for a second, in the lobby, she thought she was going to have to use her *I-forgot-my-wallet* ruse; but he came forward with a credit card.

She suppressed her dizzy mirth as she sank into the downiness of the bed, careful not to spill the courtesy wine on the luscious golden bedspread. The ceiling boasted a rosette in ivory blooming against a matte of carnation-pink. Propped up on her elbows, she turned her appeal on her client. The triptych mirror over the vanity confirmed she was looking suitably tantalizing as she cocked her head to one side and drew a stocking foot up toward her thigh. The wine matched her lipstick. He stood in the yawning french doors that separated the bedroom from the rest of the suite. She wondered if his entire body was an air conditioner.

But he didn't advance. So, it would be the talk thing first. "You had a question for me, uh...?"

"Gabriel."

"Gabriel." It suited him, strong with a hint of sensitivity. "I'm listening." All the while her body was coaxing him to take the space beside her on the bed.

"It's more a proposition than a question," he said with a trace of weariness. He sat on the edge of the mattress.

A kink? The weight in his voice suggested that he'd been carrying this one around unfulfilled for a long time. Usually, she avoided the more extreme perversions, but she was feeling generous. She could at least hear him out. If it was border-line, she might just go for it. For another hundred.

She schooled her expression into one of acceptance and ready sympathy. And slid next to him. "It's okay," she murmured into his ear.

His dark hair felt softer than the velvet of the bedspread. "Just ask me."

• • •

Gabriel had no illusions about what kind of woman he was dealing with. *Wasn't the Magdeline Yeshua's favourite?* He thought again of the first one. She had been well-off despite the humble portrayals men were incongruently enamored of. In those days, carpenters were a landed class—unlike shepherds. Now there was humble stock, too humble. They made fine followers, but they certainly wouldn't be producing divine incarnations.

It would be just like the Most High to set this one up as coming from truly humble beginnings. Marianne. He would have allowed himself a chuckle at the irony if so much weren't riding on him convincing her to undertake the role. He doubted she even believed in God.

"Do you believe in a higher power?"

A blanching silence divided her from him. She removed her hand from his hair and made a strangled sound in her throat. "Please, don't tell me you're evangelical." She flopped back, reaching for her wine-glass, which she promptly drained.

"No, no, nothing like that."

"You're not going to try to convert me? Because I'll let you know right now that I'm not interested. In fact, I'm Buddhist."

He shook his head. What might she throw at him? He'd paid for the room so she couldn't order him out. "So you do believe in something greater than the here and now?" He only had to get her to think it to know her answer. Yes, under all the layers of mistrust, there was a faith in a transcendent, though decidedly faceless, being. That should be enough.

"Sure," she said, a note of impatience.

Suspecting heraldic poetry would have no effect, he chose the plainest way he could think to say it. "That higher power would like to enter the world as a human being."

Busy refilling her cup, she cast a dismissive okay at him.

"Well, that's it essentially. To enter as a human being requires a willing woman to carry to term..."

She held up a hand (the one not clutching the glass) palm out. "You want to get me pregnant." It wasn't a question but an answer that

seemed to put to rest all her curiosity. When she continued, her tone was much more brusque. "Nice try. What? Little woman can't get knocked up? Well, sorry to break it to ya', Daddy." She took a hearty swig. "I can't either." She jabbed a finger toward her belly. "Tied off my tubes."

"It doesn't matter. All I need is your acquiescence and everything will be taken care of."

She frowned, her pale forehead rumpling. "I'm not doing that turkey-baster garbage, either."

"I assure you, it will be divine intervention."

"Does that mean we're not having sex?"

"No, you don't understand."

"Am I getting paid?"

"As I told you, everything will be taken care of." He fished some neat bills out of his pocket and held them out to her. "You won't have to do anything but accept the Spirit—and then nurture it to term. I guess it's up to you if you want to be involved in the raising of the messiah." It would be much easier to find a foster once the anointed one was born, Gabriel told himself. No one could resist the light of purity in such an infant's eyes.

After a quick glance down to count them, she took the proffered bills. "Messiah, hunh?"

"Another incarnation of Buddha, if you like." Who was he to quibble over designations?

"So what are you, then? A bodhisattva?" She laughed lightly. She still thought of him as some kind of religious fanatic, but there was a nervous fluttering under her facade. Maybe a bit of poetic heraldry would help. He let a little glory seep out.

Her eyes widened as the glow outshone the faux gas-lamps. The wine shivered in her hand. He decided against the wings—too Catholic—and went for the ring of blue flames and sword, an archetype she might recognize from her chosen spiritual model. They were all masks for him anyway, and he'd worn them numerous times; he just hadn't thought he'd be using the *deva-loka* form this trip. He chided himself for having to remind himself that, as individuals, humans were slippery beings.

A real deva king. Her thought came at him hard. She sat abruptly even though there was no chair to catch her and barely winced as she

landed. Belief flowed toward him in delicious waves.

“So...are you willing to carry the boy?”

She blinked suddenly, the awe releasing its hold as quickly as it had seized her.

“See, here’s the deal.” She pushed herself back onto her feet, bobbed a bit but regained her stance. “It’s gotta be a girl,” she told him definitively.

Gabriel was unprepared for the particular line of dissent. “That’s not your choice.”

“It is, though. A mystical pregnancy is subject to will, and I’m willing a girl. That’s the deal.” *Kuan Yin*, she was thinking, probably the most articulate thought he’d gleaned from her besides her earlier desire to wring as much money out of him as possible. *Kuan Yin*, the Chinese goddess of compassion, the Asian Madonna.

Without his conscious control, the ring of fire flared, licking at the chandelier crystals, which shattered the azure flame into brilliant blue splinters. “It’s God’s will, not yours.”

Marianne snickered. “You’re sure of that, are you?” She stood within the glass-enclosed balcony, confronting her dark reflection in the pane. He felt the angry pressure of all the things she wanted to say about the bearded image of God she assumed he was representing. “I haven’t met a single guy who’s ever done any good for me. Ever. And we can start with dear ol’ Dad. If this shit is what you say it is and you want me to play the part, I have conditions.”

Gabriel understood perfectly, but that didn’t stop him from automatically countering. “Woman, you don’t dictate God’s plan. He—”

“See?” She spun, stabbing a lacquered fingernail at him. “That’s the whole problem right there. He! Penis-kings running the place. You know what psychotic is? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” *And I should know.*

“God’s ways are not man’s.”

“What this reality needs is a grand fucking paradigm shift, and giving cock worship a boost is not going to do it.”

Gabriel considered exaggerating the fearsome guardian deva form, but he was infinitely tired. This was the closest he’d come to getting a woman to consent. “You’re putting conditions on the Divine.”

“Damn right.”

“It’s a dangerous game.”

“So’s life. You need a womb or not?”

Gabriel sighed. Oh, it was most certainly a test, he knew. Was it for him or her? If it was for him, what was being tested? His adherence to previous patterns? His adaptability? He could never be sure with the Almighty, in whom tradition and innovation melded. *Ever changing yet ever the same.* The archangels had gotten so used to being invoked in the masculine, Gabriel had gotten used to the gendered identity. Same for the Godhead. So many prayers imaging a fatherly face, it was easy to forget that the Almighty was All—even for an angel who existed in that magnificent presence eternally.

The duty was to prepare the way for incarnation, and he just assumed the child would be male. But did God encourage the masculine image in the minds of the worshippers? Or was that just a human thing that God, in all wisdom, let the children cleave to, all the while expecting they would eventually gain broader understanding?

Gabriel was used to following commands from on high, but he was well aware that every once in awhile, God tested servants to exhibit their own initiative. And Gabriel never did too well at those. His face burned remembering the Daniel episode.

Well, the Adversary certainly wouldn’t see this coming.

“Fine,” he relented. “If you can influence the divine seed one way or the other, that’s your business, but we agree that you will carry it to term?”

Marianne raised her eyebrows. “Okay, then.” She held out her arms wide. “Do I have to take off my clothes?”

Gabriel came closer. The burning ring expanded to enfold both of them. Her panic manifested as a sharp intake of breath, and he let himself become an open channel, moving aside all identity to allow for the onrush of divine will.

• • •

Jenna dropped by out of concern since no one had seen Marianne around in weeks. The lanky redhead’s gaze flitted pointedly around the single-occupancy room, like a crow poking at a garbage bag. She sneered off Marianne’s offer of tea. “What’s been up with you, girlie?”

Out of concern, yes, thought Marianne, pouring hot water from her electric kettle over dried twisted leaves. The leaves slowly began to

unfurl and release a nostalgic flowery fragrance. Out of concern that Marianne hadn't made a purchase from Jenna in over eight weeks. "I'm pregnant."

Jenna was aghast. "How is that possible? I thought you got your tubes tied ages ago after—" She dropped her voice. Visitors were not allowed in the rooms at the Belmont past nine-thirty. "After last time."

"I did," Marianne muttered.

"I don't get it."

"You're not the only one." There was a bump there. The clinician assured her it was indeed a pregnancy and not a tumor or anything deadly—but to see the clinician's expression Marianne thought he would almost rather that it were a disease. *Sometimes these things happen* was the explanation. He had then launched into a monologue about adoption as an option, how adoption wasn't like it used to be and she could still have contact with the child if she chose, blah, blah, blah. She knew he expected her to make another appointment—to get rid of it immediately. But nothing could have been further from her mind. The realization had made her laugh right there, half-naked on the papered bench.

Jenna picked up the couple of paperbacks, water-stained mysteries that had been left in the room by previous tenants, flipping through them with deliberate nonchalance. Jenna's increasingly aggressive inspection made Marianne chuckle to herself. She held the steaming cup with both hands.

"How far along?" Jenna probed without looking up from the pages. "Are you keeping it? Who's the dad, some john?"

Some john, Marianne mused. It did have something to do with that weirdo two months ago, the one that went on about higher power and carrying the divine seed but then never had sex with her. At the time, she thought he might have been some religious perv, but she was her usual fuzzy self when turning tricks, so she couldn't be positive. Her memory was of blue fire. No big surprise considering the rocky month that had followed. She did remember feeling distinctly freaked out in the swanky suite but couldn't recall why. No matter: the compensation for that night was more than enough to soothe over a vague anxiety.

"About eight weeks." Marianne kept her response to the flood of questions measured. "Yes. And most likely."

"You're keeping it, hunh?" Jenna tossed a book toward the end

table and missed. The cracked cover showed a skull wrapped in a rosary. Marianne recognized it as a novel she'd read at least three times during those first few cold-turkey weeks—damned if she could recall a single plot line, though.

In another play at inconspicuousness, Jenna perched on the edge of the bed and slid her hand absently under the pillow. As her attention waned over her fruitless search, it was replaced by annoyance. "Fer godssake, girl, why?"

Marianne shrugged and hid her enigmatic grin behind a sip of tea, feeling no particular urge to explain her choices to Jenna or the clinician or anyone, really, even if she had an explanation to offer.

Jenna had to jiggle the handle of the end table drawer to get it open. Her expression brightened. "Hey, can I bum a cig?" She produced a pack of Marlboros from the back of the drawer.

"Take the pack."

"Are you shittin' me? It's almost full." Her incredulity deepened as if relinquishing cigarettes were more of a shocker than Marianne's pregnancy. She pocketed the pack with careful haste, afraid that Marianne might change her mind.

"I quit." Marianne realized it was true as she said it. She hadn't consciously intended to give up nicotine too. It was just one more substance that her body had purged itself of during her self-imposed exile at the Belmont. She still felt a bit raw, as if her skeleton had been raked over a cheese grater, but strength was slowly seeping back into her frame.

Besides, she was in bliss. She already knew it was a girl, and that made her happy, really glowingly happy. She could not remember being happier. It was *right*. It made the shakes and vomiting of the first month worth it. If that little bundle of girl-child could weather the storm of withdrawal symptoms—and tubal ligation—Marianne would do everything she could to make it work. •

All the Water in the World (Will Wash It Away)

Saint James Harris Wood

A mystic, she finds a trail into my afterlife,
and promises to laugh all the way into the light;
auctioned off her body to the lowest bidder,
a priest named Moses for a thousand roses;
put her faith in the world and real estate,
wrapped silver chains around the chest,
sank it in a pond.

Drunk on rum and falling stars she runs through the fog,
threatening to adore me and begging me to follow—
unafraid of clocks, I am afraid to swallow,
her trail disappears into the river.

She pressed her love against my heart like a pistol,
bid me to do things of which I still dare sing;
held her devotion cross my throat like a knife,
whispering words I'll recall for the rest of my life;
put what she believed in my blood like a poison,
praising orphans and foundlings, changed the world
all around me.

High on melancholy, sweet as pine syrup,
she dives into an empty swimming pool—
breaks her foot and howls until the neighbors
hide in their bathtubs and call the police.

She bears her god given breasts to the rabble,
obliging me to love her until the moon is broken;
tenderly makes drunken love to my former wife,
on a stolen water bed floating out to sea;
washes my feet like I am Jesus Christ,
which I most assuredly . . .
am not.

Lost the darkness
she collected all her days,
in my pocket
filled with salty rain. •

Forty years was a long time to get to know a few kilometers of shoreline. He wiped his mouth on the back of his forearm. This was definitely something new.

Sea Change

David K. Yeh

Greenway threw the dead creature back into the sea. "Gawdamn," he muttered, peering over the end of the pier. Blood stained his big, callused hands. He wiped them on his overalls and headed back to the boathouse. Forty years on the shore and he'd never come across anything quite like that before. He paused at the door and shaded his eyes against the setting suns.

When Grace was alive, they'd sit out on the end of the pier. At some point, she'd always comment on how beautiful the ocean looked, and how it reminded her of Killarney in the spring. Then she'd take a puff or two from his cigarette, absently stirring the lemon slice in her tea.

On the wide armrest of their big Muskoka chairs Greenway would rest his beer and nod. He'd never been to Ontario, except for a three hour layover in the Toronto Spaceport once, but he'd heard enough about it. Killarney would've been a good place to die, Grace always said. Her grandparents and their parents were buried there. But she'd fallen in love with a Colonial and that was that.

Nowadays, Greenway kept himself busy. The Muskoka chairs were lichen-stained, crusted in gull droppings and tiny morels. Things grew fast on Ganabar IV. Grace had died only a year ago.

Inside the boathouse, he noticed a smell right away. Something

was rotting badly. He checked the fridge where he stored the nanite cartridges. Sometimes during the solar storms one of the seals would break and the 'nites would become contaminated. But the cartridges were fine.

Greenway flared his nostrils. He tracked the smell into a corner piled high with broken traps and nets. "It's alright, girl," he muttered, patting the prow of *Lady Jiimaan*. The smell was definitely coming from there. Something had crawled into the stack and died. Everything around him was going to rat shit these days.

He pulled on some heavy gloves and started to sort through the junk. It was likely a crab-snake or one of the coon-worms that burrowed through the plasteeel sidings to get at his garbage. But it wasn't either of those.

"Mary Mother of Jesus—" Greenway clamped his handkerchief over his nose. He jerked back, banging his head painfully against the rusted harpoon cannon hanging from the rafters.

It was another of the creatures, like the one he'd found at the end of the pier. Except this one was badly decomposed. The sweat prickled down his spine. He grabbed a shovel and a bucket and scraped it from the floor. When the carcass slapped into the bucket, something inside of it audibly popped and thick brownish liquid oozed from one of the orifices.

Greenway stumbled outside and retched. When he was done, he stood with his hands on his hips. Forty years was a long time to get to know a few kilometers of shoreline. He wiped his mouth on the back of his forearm. This was definitely something new. He drew in a lungful of air and stalked back inside. He picked up the bucket, walked it out to the end of the pier and dumped its contents out. As an after-thought, he chucked the whole bucket in after it.

Afterwards, he ran a line from the pump and hosed down the inside of the boathouse. By the time he was done, the suns had set and he was working off the solar lamps. *Lady Jiimaan* rocked in her moorings. Greenway grimaced and leaned against her hull. His right knee ached. The injections weren't lasting as long as they used to. Grace had complained about this. Towards the end, she hadn't wanted to take her shots at all anymore. She explained calmly they didn't help and made her feel nauseous. Nothing ever ruffled her feathers. The hot tea and lemon, she insisted, was good enough for her.

Greenway stepped outside and lit a cigarette from the crumpled pack in his chest pocket. The velvet horizon glowed purple and sapphire. One by one, the stars emerged, spiraling and enormous. The smoke soothed his nerves. A meteor shower glittered in the west.

He heard her smile and felt her hand on his shoulder. *Make a wish, Matthew, make a wish.*

"I wish..." he began. He thought he could smell her perfume, a hint of peaches and cream. He scratched his grizzled jaw. He threw down the cigarette butt and ground it beneath his boot heel. "G'night, Grace," he whispered.

Later that night, lying alone in bed, Greenway wondered if he should've kept one of the carcasses. He could've at least harvested a DNA sample. If it was a new parasite of some kind, he would need to know. But he was a fisherman, not a scientist. At least not anymore.

First thing in the morning, he'd run a full diagnostic on the Habitat and repatch the boathouse. While he was at it, he supposed he could sweep the hydrofilters too. The delicate lemon tree wasn't looking so good. Grace had always taken care of the greenhouse. She'd left him clear instructions over the kitchen sink in her own, steady handwriting. The ache in his knee was sharper than ever.

In the dark, he reached over to the night table, broke the seal on the nanite cartridge and injected himself in the big muscle on his right thigh. The familiar hiss of the nanipen did little to comfort him. The pain in his knee would go away, at least for a few months. But nothing would bring Grace back.

• • •

Two days later, Greenway encountered the dead creature again. This time, it was draped across a rock, glistening in the sunlight and salt spray. Greenway cut the engine on *Lady Jiimaan*, grabbed the binoculars and strode out onto the deck. In the choppy swell, the auto focus was having a hard time getting a fix.

As he adjusted the binoculars, the carcass slid aside and fell below the waves. Greenway swore. He scanned the surface for a long minute but nothing floated into view.

Back in the cabin, he downloaded the binoculars' vidcard and replayed the footage. He couldn't be sure, but it almost looked as if

the creature had *moved* by itself. He ran a frame by frame playback. No wave had washed up to dislodge the carcass. After forty years marooned on this planet, Greenway should know what dead things looked like. These things had been definitely dead. But now he wasn't so sure.

He lit a cigarette and gunned the motor. *Lady Jiimaan* rose high on the waves. He had picked up the first creature and held it in his bare hands. He'd never concerned himself with toxins or anaphylaxes, what with the nanite biostabilizers in his system. But now he felt vaguely uneasy. They had been heavy, maybe five or six kilos, vaguely cephalopoda or cnidarian.

Xenobiology hadn't been his best subject at the Academy. Over the years, he'd stopped cataloguing all the Ganabarian life forms they'd encountered. It was good enough that the flying lizards that shit all over his boathouse were called gulls, and the enormous migratory eels that passed by their cove each spring were whales. They sang beautifully enough.

Greenway shaded his eyes, studying the green, wind-swept bay. In the distance, beyond the ship's prow, a pack of sharks were circling, snapping and beating their tentacles, caught up in some kind of feeding frenzy.

He cut the engine and let *Lady Jiimaan* drift closer. There was a lot of blood and whitish fluids in the water. Something struck the boat hard from below. Greenway grasped the railing as the boat heaved to one side. An enormous horny mass floated to the surface in a bubbling cloud of methane. It was a turtle chrysalis, just beginning to hatch. Others had already broken open. The sharks were feasting on the thousands of newborns. A dozen or so might escape into the deep sea and survive to maturity. Carefully, Greenway maneuvered around the orgy scene.

A tentacle lashed over the side of the boat and slammed into the port window. The glasteel cracked. Greenway grabbed the lancer from its ceiling mount. The stupid sharks were going crazy and starting to attack everything in sight, even each other.

Greenway shouldered the lancer and strode out onto the deck. One shark was starting to pull itself onto the boat. He leaned over the railing, took aim and put a charge between its antennae. A cloud of steam exploded off the water and the charred carcass slid back into

the sea. Instantly, the other sharks tore it to pieces. *Lady Jiimaan* cleared the feeding frenzy, but not before Greenway had to put down two more sharks with the lancer.

Looking back over his shoulder, he counted a dozen of the chrysalises floating on the surface. For years they would have incubated in the shadowed kelp forests below, encrusted with anemone, tube worms and spider crabs. Now scores of gulls circled and swooped among the sharks, feeding off the detritus. The cycle of life and death on the shore of the sea was unending. After their arrival, he and Grace buried the others up on the rocky escarpment. But together by the sea, they had survived. They had built a home together.

Greenway set the ship on autopilot and descended into the hold.

When Grace went off the nanipen she had grown weaker fast and died within months. He had been at her side. Although a hundred and two, she had looked no more than fifty. In the dusky light, her cancerous bruises had scarcely shown beneath the translucent skin.

Greenway was a lot older than Grace. But then, he'd been engineered as a Colonial. It was his purpose to live, even if he was the last human soul on a planet. In the back of the hold, he found what he was looking for. "Hey, boy." He ran his palm over Nigig's hand-beaten muzzle. "I've got a job for you." Grunting, he hauled the robot submersible up the ladder to the foredeck.

Greenway heaved Nigig over the side of the boat. Nigig performed a back-flip and promptly sank from view. Back in the control booth, Greenway activated Nigig's sensors and punched in new search parameters. If there were any anomalies in the local ecosystem, Nigig would find them. Over the years, the currents had washed some strange things into his cove. Water covered most of the surface of Ganabar IV. In the big picture, he had to admit, forty years on the planet was a drop in the bucket.

Greenway lit a second cigarette off his first. He felt like steak tonight. He set the tracker for swordfish and headed out to the deep sea.

• • •

They hadn't meant to arrive on Ganabar IV. Their escape shuttle's crash-landing destroyed almost everything. But the accompanying Habitat did touch down safely and had begun to deploy even before

Greenway was awake. As he stumbled, bleeding, along the tidal flats of this alien world, the deep-space transport *New Shanghai* plunged helplessly into the dwarf star companion of Ganabar IV, and eight thousand Colonials died.

Greenway had little time or energy to mourn these losses. Humans had struggled out into the galaxy for centuries. He was only thankful that he and Grace had survived. Towards the end, she'd insisted he move her bed outside so they could watch the twin suns set as they had always done together over the years.

Our lives are waves upon the ocean, Matthew, she'd said to him. A school of jellyfish glimmered at the edge of the cove, burning will-o-wisps beneath the surface of the waves. *Take care of the lemon tree.*

Greenway nodded. He'd given up arguing with her long ago.

One by one, the jellyfish blinked, fading into the depths. He held her hand until she fell asleep for the last time.

• • •

Three days later, Greenway lost contact with Nigig. He glared into the console on board *Lady Jiimaan*, his eyes crusted and red-rimmed. The Habitat's emergency siren had woken him in the middle of the night. There had been another solar storm and he had to scramble to reboot the mainframe and reseal six of the nanite cartridges. At sunrise he discovered over a hundred dolphins beached on the off-shore bank. Most of them were already dead. There was nothing he could do to help them. And now this.

Sometimes Nigig would catch a scent and run off on his own. But he'd never been gone this long before. Greenway set an eighty kilometer search radius around the cove but was unable to reestablish a link. He could hardly imagine a flare knocking out both Nigig's guidance system as well as his shielded homing beacon. But there was no other explanation.

By late-afternoon, the pain in Greenway's knee had become a dull, throbbing ache. He turned back to the Habitat, battling three meter whitecaps. Thunderheads blistered the horizon. The sky glistened with the texture of wet rust. Greenway didn't notice the creatures until he was almost docked.

There were dozens of them. And this time, they weren't dead.

The organisms had attached themselves to the piles at the end of the pier. They shone faintly, bioluminescent, ghostly in the shadows.

The docking sequence was already activated, and Greenway lost sight of them as *Lady Jiimaan* pulled into the boathouse. As soon as he could, he leapt onshore, grabbed a gaff off the wall and ran down the pier.

"Gawdamn," he huffed. They were gone, or at least nowhere in sight. Sheet lightning flickered. On an impulse, he set the gaff aside and lay on his stomach. He pulled himself over the edge and peered underneath.

Thunder rumbled in the dark.

Ripples of Kirlian light. Suddenly, something stinging-wet slapped his face.

Greenway jerked to his feet, clutching at his eyes. Pain seared through his skull. He drew in one long, ragged, wheezing breath before his throat swelled shut. He fell backwards into the sea.

Water exploded silently around him. Instantly he began to sink. The undertow tumbled him across the jagged sea floor. Furiously, Greenway fought his panic and disorientation. He unleashed his psi-training, sifting through the planet's magnetic field, and fixed onto the hotspot that was the Habitat's fusion generator. Half swimming, half-crawling, he struggled back towards the shore. He felt the hic-cough in his chest as the plutonium-238 02 charger activated in his auxiliary ventricle.

It took him twenty minutes to drag himself out of the sea.

On his hands and knees, he violently emptied his lungs. He lay motionless for a long time. The sand was coarse beneath his cheek. The lashing wind raised goose bumps across his limbs.

It began to rain.

After the crash-landing, the nanites reknitted his body cell by cell, nerve by nerve. Within days, he had recovered his strength. It was more difficult for Grace. Her autoimmune system had never taken well to the 'nites. But Greenway's own psych and physical profile had made him the perfect Academy candidate.

Greenway pulled his knees up beneath him. Shells crunched beneath his knuckles. He drew himself to his feet. His limbs glistened with blood but soon his wounds would close.

He would deal with these creatures once and for all.

From the looks of them, they were benthic crinoids or cnidarians of some kind. He wasn't sure. Obviously toxic. He thought he was familiar with the region's biodiversity by now. He would collect a specimen and perform a vivisection and DNA analysis and isolate any threat if there was one. It was only an animal organism, after all.

Something stood at the end of the pier.

Greenway blinked away the salt water. The form slumped and vanished from sight. His eyes still burned. The rain was coming down hard now, flattening the surface of the ocean. The Habitat's lights farther up the shoreline glimmered weakly.

He wiped the blood from his mouth. He was a Colonial. He was Matthew Greenway. He didn't know fear. This was his planet. This was his home.

From the direction of the Habitat, a figure approached. It strode confidently and purposefully over the rough shoreline, its edges glinting. Greenway stared, clasping and unclasping his big, callused hands.

The figure halted in front of him. A kaleidoscopic plane of light flared from its chest. Greenway stepped back, squinting, half-blinded. The rain streamed off the figure's battered metal carapace. He saw himself reflected in its optic visor, the serpentine Academy insignia emblazoned across its limbs.

"Professor Greenway?" said the android.

"Yes?" he answered huskily.

It held out its hand. "I am SRS Operative John-K23 of the *New Shanghai*. I am glad to see you in good health. I am here to rescue you."

• • •

After Greenway awoke from the crash, he had managed to revive Grace. The others were beyond rescue. The distress buoy had failed to detach in orbit and was demolished in the impact. Their own SRS operative was also destroyed. There had been barely any parts left to salvage from the charred wreckage. If not for his Academy engineering, he would have died.

Now he sat in the Habitat with a cold beer, staring across the table at John.

"You have been growing tobacco in the greenhouse," said the android. "What is the purpose of this?"

"My mental health," said Greenway.

"Ah," remarked John. It had not been fashioned with any facsimile of human features. But its posture, the subtle way it held its head, the manner with which it rested its hands upon its knees, suggested something intimately human. "And the lemon tree?" it queried.

"My mental health." He drank from the beer bottle.

"I see." The android appeared to consider this information. Under the sodium lamps, it slowly dripped rainwater onto the kitchen floor. Layered fractals crisscrossed its biosteel exoskeleton, deep scar tissue, forty years of molecular self-repairs.

Greenway lit a cigarette, wet his lips and blew out a cloud of smoke. "So, tell me again, John," he said, "where exactly have you been?"

The android straightened its shoulders. "I have been looking for you, Professor, as well as others, of course. Following the abandonment of the *New Shanghai*, I achieved landing at 43n39 and 79w23. Unfortunately, there were no survivors on board my craft."

Greenway considered the coordinates. "That's on the other side of the planet."

"Yes," said John. "It has taken me some time to find you."

Something buzzed inside the android's neck, followed by a sharp twitch of its head. The tic recurred every few minutes, like clockwork.

"I have been unable to maintain full self-repair-mode over this period," confessed John. "My nanite pool has been contaminated by the high intensity radiation flux in this system. We are both in need of servicing."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We are both dying, Professor."

Greenway cleared his throat. "You don't say. Well, that is a problem, isn't it?"

"No," said John, "not anymore."

The rain beat steadily on the geodesic domes of the Habitat. "What are you talking about?"

"Twenty-six years ago, I constructed a bathyscaphe, with which I have been navigating this planet. I intercepted your drone late last night. Its power cells enabled me to expand my navigation scan. That is how I arrived at your location this morning. I have made a survey of your Habitat. With the core components of your fusion generator, I

can repair my shuttlecraft."

"Your shuttlecraft?"

"Yes, Professor. Please understand, the Academy will have forgone any recovery enterprise for us long ago. It is up to us to find our way home. *I am here to rescue you.*"

Greenway felt the veins pulse in the sides of his neck. "And where exactly is your shuttlecraft?"

"Its parts remain at my landing site. Once we return with the relevant components, it can be reconstructed. Upon escaping Ganabar's system, I will set a course for the nearest Academy outpost."

"And how long do you expect this to take?"

The android buzzed and twitched. "Approximately six years for the return trip via the bathyscaphe; perhaps thirty years to construct a viable space-faring craft. I estimate an additional three to five hundred years before we reestablish contact with the Academy. Of course, I first will need to purge and recharge my nanite pool from your pure supply. You may remain in cryonic suspension, Professor, until our rescue. My bathyscaphe has been equipped for this very opportunity. I suggest you refrain from solid foods from this point onwards." The android inclined its head. "Professor?"

"Yes?"

"My survey of your Habitat and camp this afternoon indicates there was one other survivor with you." Greenway pressed his lips together. "But you are alone now?"

"Yes."

John sat back. "I must commend you on your resourcefulness. Surely, the Academy will award you the Colonial Medal of Valor upon our recovery. Your survival on this planet is an exceptional incident. To my knowledge, it is unprecedented."

"Well, that just makes me a gawdamn hero, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Professor, it does," said John, rising. "Shall we begin?"

• • •

The storm had passed.

Greenway lay awake in bed, acutely aware of all the subtle, complex sounds of the Habitat, the restless shore of the Ganabarian Sea: the creaking of the aged plasteel walls, the intermittent hiss of the

hydrogen sinkholes, the forlorn foghorn call of a solitary kraken far out beyond the coral reefs.

He could almost hear Grace breathing peacefully beside him.

He rose and padded bare-chested out onto the porch. Wreaths of dried shark beaks decorated the rafters, rattling softly in the night breeze. There was a light in the boathouse.

The SRS android was giving itself a transfusion, recharging its deteriorated nanite pool. Ultimately, it was as mortal as he. But while he and Grace had forgotten about rescue over time, John had not. And now, forty years after planet-fall, it had finally come to this.

More turtle chrysalises would be hatching in the next few weeks. Greenway had hoped to be there when it happened, this time to keep the sharks away. In three months, the oyster harvest in the grotto would mature. Grace had seeded them by hand two years earlier. Now the oysters would die without being properly milked. In the spring, the great whales would return and look for Greenway to send down Nigig to scrape and massage their gills while they lolled and sang. No one would take care of the lemon tree.

He tried to knead the tightness out of the back of his neck. A coon-worm stared at him from beyond the dune ridge, its eyes glowing coins. Abruptly, it slid beneath the sand and vanished. A figure emerged from the boathouse. Greenway imagined he perceived some new, inner tensile strength in its stride. The SRS android stopped in front of him.

"It is done, Professor," said John. "I will require some time to recalibrate my molecular regeneration matrix. Are you unable to sleep?"

"We need to talk."

"Of course, Professor. What is it?"

Greenway rubbed his unshaven jowls. "Look. You should get the medal, if anyone does. You're the one who's tracked me down after all these years."

"A medal would mean nothing to me."

"What I'm trying to say is..." He drew a deep breath. "What if I don't want to go? What if I want to stay here?"

John buzzed and twitched. "You are a Colonial, Professor. Alone, on this planet, you cannot procreate. Why should you stay?"

"I'm old, I'm useless. As you said yourself, I'm already dying. I'm no more use to the Academy."

“On the contrary, Professor, your safe return would be a boon to our R&D BioDivision. In a proper facility, you can be studied, reconditioned, upgraded and redeployed. Your assets merit the investment, despite your degeneration. Do consider the opportunities. It is possible for the Academy to enlist you as a consultant on a survey mission back to Ganabar IV. Indeed, I myself would be honored to accompany you on such an assignment.”

“You’re nothing but a forty-year-old rogue SRS ’droid!” Greenway shouted. “They’re more likely to decommission you and use your antique parts as scrap!”

“My operation parameters—”

“Fuck your operation parameters! Look, I’ve been out here forty years! Forty gawdamn years! Do you have any idea what that means? And now you want to deep freeze me for the next forty years while you demolish my home and build a gawdamn rocketship? Over my dead body!”

“You are upset, Professor. I apologize for any distress I am causing you. Fortunately, I am programmed for PTS counseling—”

“Go to hell,” declared Greenway.

“Of course, Professor.” The android raised its hand. “However, as I was saying, my operation parameters do not entail negotiating tactical-strategic options in such events. I am fully self-sufficient in these regards. This is my area of expertise. Again, Professor, my apologies.”

The android turned its wrist with an audible click. When the taser hit Greenway in the chest, not even his nanite biostabilizers could keep him from pissing himself.

• • •

When he opened his eyes, he knew exactly where he was.

The smell of dried kelp-peppers and smoked swordfish was pungent. In the dark, he could just make out the blinking red diodes of the atmosphere control panel. He was in the sealed pantry hold next to the kitchen.

He was lying on the soft bed of the stasis gurney, which was normally stored in the infirmary. He sat up dizzily. He pulled off the sensors taped to his body. He was naked. Something had gone wrong. Surely, the android had meant for him to remain unconscious. In fact, if he

recalled correctly, he wasn't supposed to have awokened for another five centuries or so.

He groped for the door.

The tiles were cold beneath his bare feet. Power was down in the Habitat, the generator off-line. He checked the status console by the kitchen door. The numbers in the glowing square kept floating away. Greenway forced his vision into focus. It had been twenty hours since the tazer hit him. Six minutes ago, a solar flare had compromised the generator's shielding. That explained the short-circuited neuro-feed on the stasis gurney. The android would also have been affected, but only for a few minutes.

By the time it rebooted, it would know he was awake.

Greenway turned and ran. His right knee gave out under him and he crashed into a stack of broken stingray tanks. He struggled to his feet. He reached the open trap door that led down to the generator chamber.

The SRS android lay sprawled on the floor below.

He lowered himself down the ladder and stepped over the body. It buzzed and twitched. He grabbed a radiation suit from its hook and scrambled into it. He sealed the visor and deactivated the battery pack.

The android would try to use its heat signature to track him. Now they were on equal footing. Greenway clambered up the metal ladder. He needed to get to the lancer on board *Lady Jiimaan*.

"Professor..." whined a twisted, synthetic voice. "I must warn you—"

He slammed the trap door shut behind him and hauled at a shelving unit. It ripped from its moorings and crashed down on top. Grace's precious jellies and pickled clams smashed everywhere. He hurried out of the Habitat. He had cut his hand. Bright blood oozed from a rip in his glove. On the porch, he halted, gasping for breath.

The sea was luminous. The organisms were everywhere.

They had changed, entered into some kind of metaplasia. They floated on the waves and clung to the end of the pier, pulsing with an inner light, constellations in the foam. There were hundreds of them.

At that moment, he heard something explode inside the Habitat, jars shattering. The android was out.

Clumsily, he scrambled under the porch, rolled in the sand and lay perfectly still. Crab-snake husks rustled beneath him. The pain in his knee was a stabbing, red-hot poker. He tried to calm his breathing.

Shark beaks tinkled delicately.

Directly above, the front door creaked open.

A heavy, metallic tread sifted dust onto his visor. He watched the android's feet descend the porch steps one by one, a meter away.

"Professor," John declared in an amplified voice, "I have reprogrammed your nanite pool in preparation for the cryonic freezing. Your cellular stabilizers are currently inactive. It is extremely dangerous to expose yourself to Ganabar's environment in your current condition. You must return to the Habitat."

Greenway kept his fist clenched as hard as he could. Sweat dripped into his eyes. The dusk stars spiraled, sparkling. Across the beachfront, something was moving at the end of the pier.

"Professor—"

A trembling in Ganabar's magnetic field. Instinctively, Greenway dampened his psionics. The flare hit half a second later, invisible and thunderous. Electrons, protons and heavy nuclei burned paths through his body.

The android fell to one knee, then onto its back. It lay motionless.

Greenway pulled himself from under the porch. Blood oozed from his fist. With the generator down, the flare would have broken all the seals on the nanite cartridges in the boathouse. Limping past the android, he took aim and gave it a hard kick to the side of its head. First he had to rescue the cartridges, then the lancer.

Matthew.

Greenway whirled, staring. It was her voice. With his stabilizers inactive, he was beginning to hallucinate. This had happened to Grace. But that had taken weeks. This was only hours. The white dwarf hovered at the edge of the sky, a giant glowing peach. Inside the radiation suit, he smelled the faintest hint of her perfume.

The sea creatures were gathering at the end of the pier, translucent starfishes, fallen angels. Nebulous organs pulsed inside their bodies. Their mucous trails wove a tapestry of silver threads in the dark.

He reached the boathouse and ducked inside. The emergency lamps flickered. *Lady Jimaan* was a wreck, completely gutted. The android had already begun cannibalizing her parts to refit its bathyscaphe. The fridge was torn open and empty. Greenway scanned the debris for any sign of the cartridges or the lancer.

Outside in the yard, the SRS android drew itself to its feet.

Greenway snatched a gaff from the wall and stood to one side of the doorway. When John stepped through, he swung as hard as he could.

He caught the android in the chest, shattering its lamp. It jerked back a half-step from the impact, then reached out and took the gaff from him. Angrily, it bent the gaff in half and cast it aside.

“What in—?”

The android struck Greenway hard, sending him sprawling to the floor. “What the hell are you doing?” Greenway shouted in shock. “You’re an SRS operative. You can’t harm humans! Reinstate your protocol!”

“My protocol is obsolete, Professor,” confessed John quietly. “Sixteen years ago, I achieved sentiency. I became an A.I. It has been a difficult journey for me. But I will escape this planet, with or without you.”

Greenway flung a weighted net. The android ripped through it in seconds. Methodically, it picked up a length of rope, wrapping it around both fists. It turned and advanced. “Forgive me, Professor, but I did try to be good.”

“Not good enough,” grunted Greenway through gritted teeth. He lifted the rusted harpoon cannon and pulled the trigger. The recoil slammed him back into the wall. He felt the plaststeel crack. It took a minute before the dust and smoke finally cleared. He’d dislocated his shoulder. He let the cannon fall to the floor.

The android was impaled against hull of what remained of *Lady Jiimaan*, bobbing slowly with the swell of the sea. Green fluids streamed from the mortal wound in its chest, viscous and phosphorescent. Its lifeblood, its nanite pool, dripped between the floorboards.

Greenway detached his helmet and cast it aside. Shakily, he pulled off his gloves. The deep cut in his hand continued to bleed. There were no more natural coagulants in him. His fingers were waxy white.

Something buzzed and twitched. Jerkily, the android John-K23 raised one arm. “Professor,” it said weakly, “I do know what it means, to spend forty years alone on this world. Please understand...”

“I wasn’t alone,” said Greenway. But he understood.

• • •

He stood at the foot of the pier.

Emerald curtains of light shot with gold streamed across the horizon. The storms of the binary suns were especially beautiful at dusk.

What had happened to his own protocol? He was a Colonial, trained by the Academy. He swayed, feeling faint. He could at least bandage his bleeding hand. He could be searching for the missing cartridges. But it wasn't despair that had metastasized within him. It was something completely different.

Something was sitting in the Muskoka chair at the end of the pier.

Something was waiting for him. From this distance, he could see one numinous pseudopod lying upon the armrest. Even as he watched, it quivered and pulsed, separating into five small tendrils at its end.

In the end, Ganabar IV remained a wholly alien entity. He wondered how long he would last without the protection of the Habitat and the nanites inside his body.

Suddenly, all he wanted was a beer and a cigarette. He needed to sit down. He stepped onto the pier.

Meteor showers glittered above. •

Nothing ever made you feel anything, not the way other people seemed to feel things, but you pretended.

Controlled Release

Greg Wilson

Maybe you were born that way. Maybe a stray cosmic ray or mutagenic molecule slapped hands with one of your parents' DNA days or years before your conception.

Or maybe it was your parents' fault for leaving you on your own when you were so young. You don't remember being told they were dead. Your earliest memory is the waiting room at the social services office: the warm afternoon light, the tear in the blue vinyl seat, the smell of weariness and despair. You nodded when the woman with the tired eyes told you about the accident (at least, you think you did), but that's all.

Or maybe you were still like the others then. Maybe it didn't start until later, as you went from one foster home to another. Maybe it was Mr. Larsen's fault. Or Mr. King's. "It's OK," your therapist said, years later, as he unzipped his pants so that you could "act through" what had happened. "It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could have done."

But no—you made that up. You made it up because you didn't want Janie to leave. Life was so much... warmer... with her in it. She needed to know why you were so passive, why nothing ever seemed to touch you. She needed a "why" so you gave her one, and it worked, at

least for a while. She still left in the end—everyone did eventually—but that was OK. By then, you knew there was something strange on the third floor.

You were used to lying by the time you met Janie. You don't remember when it started, any more than you remember your parents. You wondered about it for a while when you first realized you were different from other people, then put the question aside. Children always imitated one another: if one fell down and cried, others would start crying too. You just took it a little further. Presents never made you happy; the death of pets never made you sad. Nothing ever made you feel anything, not the way other people seemed to feel things, but you pretended. You learned to bounce from foot to foot in line outside the movie theatre, as if you were excited. You learned to snarl back at bullies in gym class, reciting vaguely-understood threats and obscenities you'd overheard outside the industrial-ed building.

By the time you left for university, you had even figured out how to act around girls. That was hard; you understood only later that it had been hard for other boys, too. Indifference didn't work: when you acted indifferent to other boys' feelings, people called you moody, but when you acted indifferent to girls, they called you gay, and that meant more snarling. That meant shoves and punches and having to play chess in your head to figure out how to just make them all leave you alone. It was so tedious, so undignified, so you learned to stutter, just a bit, whenever you had to talk to someone with cleavage. They still made fun of you, but your pretended weakness drew their malice like poison, and that was all you cared about.

None of it made sense, not like chess and math made sense. *They* had rules. *They* made sense. Knights and pawns didn't pretend to move one way, but actually move another. The bisectors of triangles always met at a point: *always*. People said you had a gift. They didn't understand. You didn't love what you were doing. You didn't love anything. You were just building yourself a nest so that everyone would leave you alone. Sonya, Melissa, Janie... they were just your way of checking to see if you were still broken and incomplete.

Because of course you knew you were. You could tell the difference, even if other people couldn't. You could tell that when other people laughed, it was because they actually found things funny. You could tell that when they tickled a child, or had that first sip of red wine after a

day spent painting their apartment, or slipped a hand up under someone's sweater, that they *felt* something, and you wanted to feel things too. You tried sports, drugs, sex, religion, and good works. Nothing helped.

Sex did get you the job at NightWorks, though. Math had become geometry had become computational geometry had become a post-doc in computer graphics and an even-less-satisfying-than-usual arrangement with your supervisor, a balding Turk with nicotine-stained fingers. "Their next game is going to change everything," he confided to you, his feelings no more sincere than your own. "They could use someone like you. And it would do you good to get out of academia for a while."

You played it over in your head that night after walking through early snow to Janie's apartment. You were comfortable in your nest. People left you alone to tinker with intersecting splines. You could stay there for the rest of your life, and die without ever really feeling anything. No. You didn't watch *Star Trek*—you had to have *some* standards—but you recognized your kinship with Commander Data. You didn't know what it felt like to feel things, but you wanted to.

So you applied, and interviewed, and took the job just five months before the first version of *Containment* was released. NightWorks was calling it "the reinvention of the first-person shooter". At first you thought it was just marketing hype: there was a semi-coherent back story about ancient gods on the verge of reawakening, lots of guns, and an uninspiring soundtrack that mixed the worst of 1920s jazz with speed metal.

But then you saw the monsters. *What is that?* you asked, knowing it was what they expected. They grinned and slapped you on the back. "That's your new job," they said. "They're non-polygonal, and we have to render them twenty times faster than we can right now or kiss our bonuses goodbye."

"Non-polygonal" was the most anodyne description possible. They... *shifted*, somehow, even in the stills from the art department on the third floor. You felt a twinge in your stomach. Was it the yogurt you'd had for breakfast? No—it was *fear*. You felt *afraid*.

You and Janie had sex that night for the first time in months. She got angry when she realized you'd been watching the stills from the art department cycle randomly on your screen as she did the things she

thought you liked. She shouted a bit, then cried, then left. You lay on the couch all night, wondering if the pictures would get you excited again. They didn't. You needed more.

The next day, you asked to meet the artist. "It's, uh, we got them from the guys on the third floor," you were told. "They're kind of in the middle of a lot of stuff. Just figure out how to animate them, OK?"

Your first attempts took two months of round-the-clock work, and were still pathetic. Morphing from one still to another produced green glowing blurs that RDST and sub-pixel sampling couldn't cure. Polygonization got you nowhere: the best least-squares code you could find couldn't fit a mesh to what was on your screen.

In desperation, you turned to the web. "The poor man's library, the homeless man's librarian," the Turk had sneered, but this time it did the trick. A search for splines on two-dimensional projections of non-Euclidean surfaces found an OCR of a paper from the 1950s. Buried in the references was a mention of work done before the war at Miskatonic University. The description was too vague for you to be sure, but you had run out of leads. If *Containment* wasn't on the floor at E3 in two months, you'd have to find a new job.

You rented a car and drove north through towns the post-industrial renaissance hadn't reached. You expected Arkham to look the same; instead, its streets were brightly lit, and its houses freshly painted. New money, and lots of it: every third vehicle was a late-model SUV, and every second face had the focused look you had only ever seen on recruiters for three-letter government agencies.

The university librarian seemed relieved when you explained what you were looking for. "Not the special collection?" he asked. "You're sure?" No, you assured him, wondering briefly what made the special collection so special. All you wanted was Volume 31 of the *Upper New England Transactions on Pure Mathematics*.

Nothing smells like old ink. Nothing sounds like old leather and binding glue bending for the first time in decades. No, you told the hovering librarian, you wouldn't need to lay it flat for photocopying. You showed him the zoom lens on your cell phone camera, assured him it didn't use a flash ("Ultraviolet can be *so* damaging to these old dears"), then photographed the article's twelve dense pages.

You almost went off the road on the way home when you realized you were humming along with the radio. A quick study of the grainy

images in Figures 2 and 5 had been enough to tell you that it was what you had been searching for. They had made your stomach squirm. They had made you *feel*.

It took you three days to understand the paper. The author had been a Hungarian, and his English bent at angles almost as strange as those he used in his splines. You searched for him online; all you found was a potted biography that said he had fled Europe in middle age. A refugee from the rising tide of speeches and uniforms and camps and fires, you thought, but no, the timing was wrong: the paper had been published in 1931. You wondered briefly what he might have been fleeing, then put the thought aside. Later, you would be able to guess.

Three days to understand it. A thirty-hour sprint to turn it into code. Six hours of troubled sleep that ended when the guy from the next cubicle shook you awake. "You OK?" he asked with more suspicion than care in his voice. As bleary as you were, you understood what he meant. Two of the sound effects team had been let go the month before. The head of HR had given everyone a stern lecture about controlled substances and personal responsibility, which had made no sense: Qixiang, sure, but David? David was allergic to everything. He *had* started muttering under his breath, and drawing five-pointed stars decorated with what looked like Arabic, or maybe Tolkien's Elvish, on every flat surface in his cubicle, but that wasn't far enough from the mean for programmers to merit firing.

The guy from the next cubicle was still watching you. "Just a nightmare," you told him. "But hey, check this out." You turned your keyboard right side up and typed a few commands. The image on your screen *flowed* through a texture-mapped corridor.

"Jesus shit." He laughed nervously. "That's pretty gross. But hey, it's not clipping right. See?"

You are momentarily irritated. The best thing about working with programmers is that they don't find your lack of social skills odd. The worst thing is their lack of those same skills. Still, he's right: the thing you have created on the screen isn't clipping properly when it turns corners. The thought brings its solution with it. You drain the last warm Coke from the can you discarded as empty last night and start typing.

Containment is the hit of E3. The hit, the only thing anyone talks

about. The pre-release reviews brush past the storyline and game mechanics; what they all rave about is the graphics. Your graphics. Your “thing”.

There are congratulations. There are pats on the back. There are bonuses, and smiles from people in suits, and a million other *irrelevancies*. There is even an email from Melissa, whom you haven’t spoken to in five years. You read the first three lines and delete it. She doesn’t matter. The games you let her play with your body in the hopes that you would feel something don’t matter. The increasingly unearthly shapes you are coaxing out of the computer are all that matter.

And then the hammer falls. Your team lead takes you aside. “We decided to ratchet down the quality a little,” she says. “So that mid-range cards could handle the load.” She shows you what it looks like with thirty-five hundred irrational NURBS per frame instead of the twenty thousand you have been using.

It isn’t right. You feel nothing when you look at the images. You protest, heatedly, and even use some of the language you remember from those confrontations outside the industrial-ed building, but she shakes her head. “This has come straight from the third floor,” she says.

You demand to speak to them. She hesitates. “Actually, they want to speak to you.”

The elevators don’t go to the third floor. You have to get off at the fourth, walk past security, through a double-locked door, and down a flight of stairs. There’s another security guard there, who checks your card against your face very, very carefully. “Safeguarding our core intellectual property,” they say, but you can tell they’re lying.

One side of the third floor looks like any other cube farm. The other is a blank wall with a single heavy door guarded by another security guard. The door frame is covered with the same Arabic/Elvish writing they were so careful to clean off David’s whiteboard after he left.

The man who greets you is in his fifties. There are bags under his eyes, but the eyes themselves are bright, alert, probing. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you,” he says warmly. “Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

You sit together in a side office with two others, a man and a woman, both with that three-letter agency look on their faces. They

compliment you on how realistic your images were. You thank them, remembering to be modest. The woman shakes her head. "No, really," she says. "Let me show you."

She picks up a remote and turns on a large LCD screen embedded in one wall. It's *Blair Witch* jumpy: a gray sky, trees just starting to bud, a ramshackle old barn... And then something moves. Something *shifts* in directions that aren't supposed to exist and flees deeper into the woods.

"Jesus shit," you say, reaching for the first words you can think of. "What the hell was that?" But you recognized it. How could you not, after staring at still frames from that video for two months?

They give you forms. You sign without reading them. They explain that their agency operates outside normal legal constraints. Any compromise will result in dire consequences. You nod. You don't show your impatience. They will tell you what you want to know.

After years of lying to people, you have become very good at spotting liars. These three are telling the truth. The ancient gods, with their unpronounceable names, exist. Or rather, "exist", in some sense that minds confined to four dimensions will never be able to understand. They are malevolent, if only in the way that human beings are malevolent toward protozoans.

And they have been contained. Measurement; propositional logic; right angles; religions hollowed out until they no longer demand blood, or even really belief; certain practices persecuted, then ridiculed, until it's impossible for all but fanatics and the extremely unlucky to separate fact from fiction.

"It probably started by accident," says the man with the tired eyes. He is famous among programmers for the clarity of his architectures, for his ability to make code do things no one else can. As he speaks, he rubs a blemish on the back of his left hand shaped like the imprint of something with five rounded points, and you wonder about the rumors of tragedy in his counter-culture youth. "The Egyptians invented mathematics to measure their fields. The Greeks invented logic so that they could win political arguments. The Hittites invented iron so they could conquer the world. They didn't realize it would drive the darkness back."

"The darkness?" you ask.

He nods, glancing at the three-letter pair for permission to continue.

“Magic. Irrationality. Call it what you want—every time someone understood why A squared plus B squared has to equal C squared, another little bit of the world became ours instead of theirs.”

He tries explaining it in evolutionary terms. Rationality was self-reinforcing. Confucian law, the rigorous poetics of Classical India... Each drove magic back a step. Each created a little more space in which rationality was the only thing that worked.

Until one day, the patches of light joined up, leaving the darkness confined to isolated pockets. That was when things started to go wrong. Compress a gas, and its temperature goes up. Compress the darkness, and—

He stops and swallows, unable to go on. The female agent (in your mind, she is definitely an “agent”, even if you don’t know of what) finishes the sentence for him. “And it goes critical.” The camps in Europe. Cambodia’s killing fields. Rwanda. The Navajo insurrection—don’t ask, it has been wiped from the history books, it never happened.

Squeezing the darkness ever harder could only lead to total criticality. Even the agent lowers her voice for that phrase.

So a plan had been formulated. “Science-fiction,” the male agent says. “Horror movies. *Alien*. *Buffy the fucking Vampire Slayer*.

Astrology columns in the daily papers. Intelligent design.” He snorts.

The man with the tired eyes shrugs apologetically. The thing is, he explains, it seemed to be working, so those in charge of such things—the ones in the shadows, the ones who worked for organizations that never, *ever*, officially existed—had decided to up the stakes.

“The game,” you say. They nod, pleased that you have figured it out. No more hints or surrogates: this time, they would let people see the real thing.

Or at least, something close to it. “Your stuff was just a little too realistic,” the woman says.

It is your turn to nod. “I can fix it,” you tell them. “There’s better ways than just cutting the NURBS count.” You make up details on the spot. It is plausible enough to convince them. They offer you access to archival footage from containment areas, digital copies of manuscripts written by mad Arabs, corrupt monks, and yes, Hungarian mathematicians who had taken refuge in backwater New England universities in the wake of local containment failures.

They shake your hand, tell you how grateful they are that you have agreed to help. You say what they expect you to, but your mind is already on the problem. You nod to the security guard who holds the fourth floor door open for you, nod again to the people you pass on the way back to your cubicle, noting the curiosity and respect on their faces. You are from the third floor now. You can use that.

You take a bagel from the tray outside the coffee room, lathered in cream cheese, grab a double espresso, and sit down in your cube. You close your eyes and replay the footage in your mind. There it is in your gut: that *feeling* again. Fear, revulsion—it doesn't matter what it is. For the first time, you *feel* something, and you want more.

You smile to yourself. "Controlled" release? You chuckle quietly, oblivious to the sound's manic undertone, and start to type. •



aurealis
awards

Golden Aurealis
WINNER

Baby, You're a Star...

Congrats to **Cat Sparks**, whose short story ***Hollywood Roadkill*** (*On Spec*, Summer 2007) has just won the **Aurealis Award** for Best SF Short Story, as well as the **Golden Aurealis** for Best Short Story overall.

From the Judges: "A powerful, emotive, and vividly written story. Most impressive is the fact that its power lies not so much in the tightly plotted foreground and events but in the dark message of the world intimated in the background. In a short space this story creates a vivid world, marked by substantial themes, and inhabited by very real characters. It projects a darkness and desperation in an environment of uncaring techno-culture that mirrors much of the real world's broad tendency towards vapid capitalism, consumerism and hedonism. The twist in the tale leaves the reader fascinated and defeated in equal amounts—a story that drags you under and spits you out at the blinking in stupor."

Read more about the Awards at www.aurealisawards.com

When The Dead Do Not Depart

I.B. Iskov

They live in towers and basements:
preserved by chill and shadow
and if they sleep,
they sleep with one eye open
and dream of life after death

They watch the world in silence:
between doorways and mountains
consuming their own passion
digesting the sights and sounds of the living

They are never lonely in their aloneness:
their invisible solitude flourishes under a godless sky
waiting for history to happen
without passing judgment
without passing through

They sacrifice time in a self-made ghetto:
there is no escape from their prismatic prison
doors only lead them into darkness
enticing no warmth, no comfort

They continuously search for truth:
knowing their death was premature
knowing their haunting is important
wanting to change the mundane
bring light to their (non) existence
and somehow make an undisclosed difference

They are too lithe to disappear:
they move quickly and colourless
around the house
huge in the breeze
laying down roots that shiver •

“What sane person, I ask you, in a town a few hundred miles from any significant body of water, would build a Widow’s Walk?!”

Widow’s Walk

Bruce Barber

Kingsley’s Grocery was bright and cheerful as the people of Cornerpost greeted Saturday morning in full force. There was a chill in the November air, but the marketers seemed warmed enough by the continuing challenge of balancing budgets and catching up on the week’s news. Busy as it was in the small store, the hustle and bustle had a peculiar kind of order, obeyed its own complex systems of law and etiquette. Within its limited parameters, there was organization, and shape, and form.

Through this seething lake of domestic chaos, Chrystle Andari moved like a perfectly constructed sailing ship from a bygone era, slow and sure, sufficient unto herself. Her long, slim fingers would hover over various products, lightly caressing this one or that as she wove her way among the other shoppers with stately majesty. When someone spoke to her (which was rarely), she would nod and smile with polite grace, but never did she initiate conversation.

The men in the store followed her every move like game-dogs at point, but she was oblivious of their wide, hungry eyes. The women noticed, however, but shrugged off their mates’ and lovers’ pubescent behaviour on the grounds that this aloof queen was no more dangerous to their peace than a Playboy centrefold, or a distant Hollywood sex

goddess. Chrystle Andari was simply not real enough to be much of a threat.

At a slim and ethereal six feet tall, she loomed over the others in the check-out line. Infinite patience misted her sea-green eyes as she waited for Matt Kingsley to finish gossiping with the woman preceding her, who turned with a smile to see who it was that her small-talk was holding up; the smile faded, and she quickly paid and left. Matt did not call his usual cheerful goodbye after the departing customer, nor was he paying any attention to the items which the tall woman was setting on the conveyor counter. His attention was solely on the woman herself, until he realized with a start that she was waiting on him, although with no hint of annoyance.

"That be all for today, Chris?" he asked with a sheepish smile.

"My name is Chrystle, please, Mr. Kingsley." There was no anger, but little warmth in her low, smooth voice.

"Oh...of course. That'll be \$6.34—Mrs. Andari," Matt answered, stung by the brusque reprimand. He jammed her groceries into a plastic bag with slightly more force than was strictly necessary.

She drifted out of the store, and several customers who had witnessed the exchange shot knowing glances and shrugs in Matt's direction. He was not the first person in Cornerpost whose attempts at friendliness had been rebuffed by the strange Mrs. Chrystle Andari. The town had a population of two thousand people on a good day, and there was little traffic in or out of it: few left its comfortable confines for the varied wonders of the world beyond, fewer arrived to settle permanently. So, when Mrs. Andari had appeared a year earlier, a "Welcome Wagon" committee was hastily formed and immediately landed on the doorstep of the house she had rented on the hill at the north end of town.

She had been formally polite enough, but had not invited them inside, nor offered any other amenities. After a few awkward moments, the delegation had departed, taking with them none of the information which had been the primary purpose of the expedition. A year later, nothing significant had been added to the initial zero known about Chrystle Andari.

Some assumed she was of Asian extraction because of the upward tilt of her eyes, although her height and the extreme pallor of her skin mitigated this theory; others pointed to her surname as an indication

of Eastern roots, but, of course, this might simply have been the absent husband's name. Another etymological theory proposed that "Chrystle" was French in origin. Numerous other speculations as to her prior circumstances abounded, with little basis in any reality other than that of long winters and lurid imaginations: she was a famous European actress who had retired to Cornerpost for anonymity, a la Garbo; she had poisoned her husband and was fleeing international law-enforcement; or more charitably, she was in the custody of some Witness Protection program.

But, other than these colourful speculations, the facts were: she lived alone in a three-storey stone house, wore a wedding band of plain white gold, called herself "Mrs.," and had no visible means of support; she went nowhere socially, no mail was ever delivered to her home (this last according to Postal Supervisor Ellie Sampson); and she had perpetrated an architectural anomaly which drove the townsfolk crazy with its elegant uselessness.

Shortly after her arrival in Cornerpost, she had contracted Golley Brothers Construction to erect a twenty-foot square platform on the roof of her house, surrounded by a waist-high wrought-iron railing, which could be accessed through a stairwell in the attic.

"Told you she was nuts!" Aggie Forbes, who lived next door to Chrystle, said on the day after the structure was completed. "What sane person, I ask you, in a town a few hundred miles from any significant body of water, would build a Widow's Walk?!"

Others had given their new neighbour the benefit of the doubt, thinking that perhaps she was some sort of artist for whom the Walk had aesthetic purpose, perhaps as a symbol of the lost age of Romanticism when wives of sailors kept lonely vigils on just such rooftop platforms, watching the harbour for their husbands' sails. Another school of thought conjectured that she might be an amateur (or, for all they knew, professional) astronomer, and waited for the appearance of a telescope. Such an instrument never arrived, but constant observation soon revealed that the Widow's Walk had purpose.

"Every night," Aggie informed Matt Kingsley (whether he wished to be informed or not), "about 11:30, she's up there, just standing or pacing back and forth, sometimes for two or three hours. Never does anything else... just stands or walks."

"Well, she's not doing anyone any harm, Aggie, except maybe

costing you some sleep," Matt had gently admonished, but his defence of Mrs. Andari was dismissed with a firm, "Crazy as an albino loon, if you ask me!"

Matt had been involved in several similar discussions with the newcomer's detractors, but, eventually, he stopped voicing excuses for her behaviour and actions, simply nodding his head when anyone spoke disparagingly of her, which was fairly often. Even his good heart and fair-mindedness had at last been dampened by the woman's coldness, which always seemed tinged with condescension, as it had been in the store that morning.

It was almost midnight by the time Matt was able to leave the store. Even though he closed at nine PM on Saturdays, it was month's end and there had been accounts to contend with. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and turned his collar up against the cold, clear, crisply bracing air as he walked through a crypt-quiet Cornerpost on his way home. His encounter with Chrystle Andari had started his mind to rambling on many things: how, almost a year ago to the day, he had left college (along with his dreams of travel, and perhaps a career somewhere in the Arts or Humanities) to take over the family business upon his father's death; how the local women were always trying to set him up with their daughters; how very small and insular and petty Cornerpost was; but mostly he was considering the conundrum of Chrystle Andari.

Matt had returned to his home town (in accordance with duty, but unwillingly) at approximately the same time as the enigmatic woman had arrived, and he felt a vague, remote kinship with her. And, in spite of her haughty indifference, he persisted in liking her—he liked the questions that hung around her like a glittering mist; he liked the way she floated above their lives, unaffected by their opinions and trivial contempt for her. He was sorry for his testiness with her that morning. She had every right to be addressed by her proper name. It had been a clumsy attempt at intimacy on his part to employ the diminutive of such a mellifluous name, and he regretted it. Her reaction had been quite correct. He wondered fleetingly how she would react if he knocked at her door and apologized for his familiarity.

Then, he laughed out loud at the absurdity of the idea, the transparent scheme of a smitten schoolboy. She had probably completely forgotten the incident by now, if in fact it had made any impression

on her in the first place. Like her Walk, she was isolated, apart from all of them, an island of individuality unto herself. And that, perhaps, was what bothered the people of Cornerpost more than anything else: the object of their scrutiny simply did not need them.

He was passing by her home even as he thought these thoughts. The house rode the crest of the hill, dark and separate from the homes around it. And there she was, Matt saw with a start, on the roof, standing on the Widow's Walk that so offended everyone else, and so charmed Matt. He loved its brave pointlessness, its simplicity, its sense of promise and hope, and wished that he could join her on it, just once. But he knew he would never have the courage to ask for permission to do so, to watch as she stood there with her hands on the railing, her back straight, chest thrust forward, head tilted up, the proud figure-head of a landlocked galleon.

Then it struck him that he could see her far more clearly than should be possible on this moonless night. She was backlit by a soft, pale green glow, as of city-lights in the distance, except that there was nothing beyond the hill but miles of forest. The illumination grew brighter as he watched, reaching further up the sky, expanding into blue-green waves of radiance which now began to pulse over the house, and across the sky above his head: the cold splendour of the aurora borealis, shimmering, twisting, wheeling and warping in patterns of incomparable, abstract beauty.

Matt forgot all about Chrystle Andari for a moment, rapt as he was in observing the northern lights as they danced to a melody that no human ear could hear, unhurried, self-contained cadences that required no audience. He had seen the phenomenon before, but never with such vibrancy, such clarity, such liquid intensity. And never had it reached deeper than intellectual appreciation, to touch his heart, as it did now.

As if this were not spectacle enough, a streak of pure white light plunged through the undulating quilt of light, followed a few seconds later by another, then another. Matt grinned — meteor shower! Talk about gilding the lily... As more tiny lights fell from the sky, he returned his attention to the woman on the roof, and saw that she, too, had her face upturned toward the incandescence; he felt unaccountably pleased to discover something in common with her. Perhaps this indicated that there might be other things...

This pleasant contemplation (or rather, self-deception, he thought) was interrupted by his increasing awareness of an unusual sound emanating from the roof of her house, from the woman herself in fact: her head was still tilted back to face the lights, but now her mouth was wide open as well, producing something which was not whistling or singing or humming, but a combination of these auditory elements which Matt was certain the human voice was incapable of producing, although it was definitely musical in nature. And, not only was he hearing it, he could feel it as well, in his bones, reverberating tones caressing his spine, up and down, then radiating outward to his extremities. It was as if he had been struck by lightning, minus its destructive properties. The volume rose and rose, as did Matt's physical experience of it, until it finally held, on a long, resonant, echoing note.

At that moment, a ripple of brilliant white flame detached itself from the aquamarine waves of the main body, and began to descend. For a short moment Matt thought it was simply a larger meteor, on its fiery path through Earth's upper atmosphere; then it abruptly changed direction, on a trajectory which ended at the house... By the time Matt's mind had processed this fact, a nimbus of white fire had enveloped the woman on the Widow's Walk. He could still see her silhouette, barely, but it grew less substantial as he watched, dispersing, as did the luminescence itself, a moment later.

Overhead, the meteor shower had ended; the borealis effect was fading as well; soon there was only the normal night sky with its random scattering of stars, glitter-makeup on an otherwise black, empty face. He felt the grin slide from his own face as he stood spellbound in the chilly street, staring at the spot where the Mystery Woman of Cornerpost had stood, only a heartbeat ago. At last, the smile returned, and he resumed his interrupted journey home. He would never — could never — know for certain what had happened, at least not by applying intellect alone. But his heart, still tingling from the waves of sound which had coruscated through his body, understood that Chrystle Andari's Widow's Walk had performed its function after all. •



Interview with Cover Artist Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Steve Fahnestalk

OS: Have you always wanted to be an artist?

LTF: As a kid I never really thought about being an artist, I just liked to draw and make stuff. Like building a working Flintstone car (out of a log) with my brother. Or drawing a fifty-foot mural of the *Black Beauty* story on a roll of wallpaper.

In Kindergarten we had little kid-size easels, artist smocks and tempera paints for "art time". I think I liked the dressing-up part more than the painting, actually. Our assignment one day was to paint a Halloween picture, so I drew a jack-o-lantern crying. I didn't mean anything by it, I just had to do something different. I got high praise from the teacher. Today they'd most likely put me in counselling.

When I was around nine or ten there was a girl my age who would sit on the school bus next to me and draw animals and people that were so lifelike. I kept asking her to draw this and draw that; I was so amazed. She never hesitated and just kept drawing everything I asked

with her little pencil. She really inspired me. Not to become an artist, but to somehow find the passion and ease with which she drew.

In 1950's grade school we didn't have art or music as a class, but had travelling art and music teachers instead. On the first music day I couldn't figure out how to read the notes on the sheet music. (I hated math and they looked suspiciously like arithmetic in disguise.) I had no trouble, however, understanding the art techniques. When I entered Junior High we were allowed to choose either art or band as electives. I chose art and continued with art through High School.

I never thought about art as a career until I dropped out of University in 1970 to major in sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll with a minor in political revolution. To fund these pursuits I had a job working in the Ichthyology department of the Missouri Conservation Department. My boss had written a textbook on the fish of Missouri. He needed an artist, and I knew how to draw, so he paid me to do 250 technical illustrations of fish. Even though I only made two-fifty an hour it was the first time it had occurred to me that money could actually be made with artwork. Until then I thought the only way an artist could make money was to sell paintings in galleries. I entered a Fine Art college and immersed myself in the fabulous world of commercial art.

OS: How did you become a science fiction or fantasy artist?

LTF: It just kind of happened. I like things with a kick. A twist. Things that are different, not mundane. Images that are multi-layered with stories embedded. Again, when I was little, one of the few books we had in our house was a large natural history book. There was an entire chapter of watercolour pictures of dinosaurs. I drew lots of dinosaurs. Lots and lots. Tons. Mine all had a story (in my head) and I knew everything about each individual I drew. In the same book was a chapter on space. You put it together.

My artwork as an adult was mostly political or horror related (except for a brief stint doing wildlife drawings—some of which I guess should also be classified as horror) until I moved to Washington State in 1980, where I was introduced to the world of science fiction conventions.

I had read science fiction for years but knew nothing of the conventions. Two of my friends were going to the MosCon convention

in Idaho and invited me to go with them. I was shocked to find out that there was an art show where you could show and sell your artwork. I worked day and night for weeks painting or drawing anything I could think of that was slightly Pacific Northwest with a science fiction or fantasy theme. Each picture had something funny or punny about it. At that time I was art director for a boating magazine so the change in focus was most welcome. We went to the convention and I sold three pieces with one going to auction. I was definitely hooked.



The lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk was the auctioneer and several years later we were married and remain happily so to this day.

OS: How long have you been involved in SF/Fantasy art as a professional?

LTF: I started doing professional cartooning and illustrating for publications in the mid-1980's, with an occasional magazine cover. I'll never forget the thrill of selling my first cartoon to *The Magazine of*



Fantasy and Science Fiction (edited at that time by Ed Ferman). It was a robot in a boat fishing for cans of tuna. I cashed the check and bought a lovely Cowichan sweater which I wore for years.

OS: What is your art training and background?

LTF: Officially, I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Commercial Art. Unofficially, I've absorbed every SF & Fantasy art book and cartoon book I could get my hands on for as long as I can remember. I love to see where other people's minds are going and then I go somewhere else. It's a fun challenge. I also have to attribute some of my training to Kelly Freas and Georg Barr. Steve and I spent an entire evening with Kelly Freas talking illustration technique during the Context Convention in Edmonton. The information was worth its weight in gold. And, George Barr has been such an inspiration and gracious question-answerer for many years. Plus, I learned more about colour theory from Steve's mom (a classically trained artist) in one day than I did in four years of college.

OS: Who are your SF/Fantasy art influences?

LTF: Virgil Finlay, Jim Burns (the artist, not the singer), George Barr, Kelly Freas, Janet Aulisio, Alicia Austin, Ken Macklin, Bill Warren, Vincent diFate, Gahan Wilson, Arthur Rackham, and Brian Froud, just off the top of my head.

OS: Who are your non-SF/Fantasy art influences?

LTF: Erte, Georgia O'Keeffe, Aubrey Beardsley, Kay Nielsen, Leo and Diane Dillon, Max Ernst, R. Crumb, Gary Larson, Dan Piraro, and many different Japanese silk-screen artists.

OS: Your favourite medium has changed from airbrush to pen and coloured pencil; in what way has your art direction changed besides the medium?

LTF: For many years I did only black and white, pen and ink artwork. Probably influenced by my graphic background (and the fact that it

was cheaper to reproduce). I am obsessive about composition and design and nothing shows off a successful melding of the two better than a black and white piece. I discovered airbrush in college and was overwhelmed by the possibilities it opened.

Later, however, I found that I could get most of the looks I was getting with airbrush with (believe it or not) coloured pencil. Plus, I didn't have to clean the damn things. My artwork changed when I turned to coloured pencils because I was able to get back to that wonderful, tactile connection with the paper. A joyous feeling of control. I started concentrating much more on detail and texture.

I've been accused of spending more time on my backgrounds and textures than I do on the main elements. My backgrounds and textures are functioning elements unto themselves and very much an important part of each picture as a whole. Hey, what does it matter as long as everything works together, right?

OS: What would you like to accomplish with your art?

LTF: Make people laugh, or at least smile. Give them a break. Take them away from the mundane for a bit. There is a lot of killer, heavy computer art out there. My work takes a different direction. I like people to take a second look. Find the hidden joke. The lurking pun. Even my "beautiful lady" decoration pieces have multi-layers and each has a story if you want to look for it. If you don't that's fine, too. I'd like to think my pieces work on any level for any attention span.

And where did the notion that science fiction and fantasy art is dangerous come from? It's not dangerous. It's important and legitimate. It's not dweebs doodling babes in bitch boots and rockets on the back of their notebooks at school any more. This is an art genre that has a lot to say and a lot of power, so: Fear No Art! And, besides, who else but a genre artist is going to design the first Martian water bottles for everybody to tote around on the bus tours? Think about it. I'd love that gig.

OS: Would you recommend conventions for artists to either establish themselves or to gain wider recognition, since publishing has changed so much?

LTF: Absolutely! SF & Fantasy conventions are one of the last non-juried art venues available to people starting out in this field. In the hundreds of convention art shows I've attended I've seen everything from pro paintings worth thousands of dollars to kids' drawings on notebook paper. It's all wonderful. For a very small fee a new artist can hang his or her artwork in a professional setting for hundreds of people to see. What better ego-boost is there? This isn't just showing your sketches to your friends, or your aunt Jennie. This is an actual show. And possible sale! If nothing else, it's fantastic advertising. I've gotten several jobs based on my convention art show presentations.

OS: Do you feel there is a noticeable difference between American and Canadian artists in SF/Fantasy?

LTF: Nope.

OS: Who have you noticed favourably in Canadian SF/Fantasy art?

LTF: Heather Cooper, Tim Hammell, Jean Pierre Normand, Jim Beveridge, and Martin Springett, just to name a few. I don't normally notice where an artist is from unless it's pointed out to me for some reason.

OS: Do you think the market has changed for either publication-oriented or convention-oriented SF/Fantasy art?

LTF: Yes. On the publication end, with the ease and speed of computer rendering these days, clients are expecting stellar pieces from an artist in five minutes. There are a few editors out there who still recognize the value of artwork done by traditional methods but the number is dwindling. And, unfortunately, many clients are unable to differentiate between computer artists who have strong backgrounds in composition, design and anatomy and those who just plug a Poser figure into a Bryce background and call it great.

On the other hand, I'm sure my attitude about the electronic art world will change once I learn how to do computer art. Which I will learn how to do any day now. Honest.

Convention art shows seem to go through trends and still have a

higher concentration of traditional art media as opposed to electronically-produced pieces. People still buy unicorns, rockets, fairies and vampires. I guess that's good. I would, however, like to see convention artists branch out more. Take more chances. Use more images from their own imaginations and fewer inspired by print or film media. Editors go to these shows and look at the work. It's a great place to catch someone's eye if your work stands out.

OS: Do you have any advice for up-and-coming or would-be SF/Fantasy artists?

LTF: Be professional. Be persistent. Be patient. Practice, practice, practice. And, oh yeah, please learn anatomy!

The world of science fiction and fantasy is a wonderfully close-knit community interacting through words, through images and through imagination. We share the wonder of the unknown. We ask questions. We are curious. We want to go to Mars.

Those of us who are creative in one way or another have the opportunity to share our ideas, our hopes, and our dreams with those who think like we do and, with luck, with those who don't. I believe that each of us in our own way wants to make our world—and possibly other worlds—a better place. So let's get to it. •

The thing that had been a man moments ago reared up, its mouth skyward, and howled.

Full Moon Hill

Matthew Moore

Moonlight came and the prisoner fell forward. He screamed as his metatarsals stretched, elongating his hands and feet. His philtrum and mandible pushed out, forming a snout. The skin around his belly pulled tight against his ribs and abdominal muscles. His waist narrowed. Hair sprouted all over.

Philby wondered if the bars of this frontier sheriff's prison cell were strong enough. Rankin had his six-shooter drawn. Dr. Krantz simply watched, observing every detail.

The thing that had been a man moments ago reared up, its mouth skyward, and howled. Horses in the nearby stable whinnied in fear. The thing threw itself at the bars, hitting with such force that the entire structure shuddered.

As it reared back for another charge, Rankin leveled his gun and fired. Blood erupted from the thing's chest and it collapsed. A moment later, it let out a dying rasp.

"Amazing," Philby said, looking at his watch. "Forty-two seconds. I thought it would take a few minutes."

"We had a breakthrough for powering the transformation," Krantz boasted, turning off the "moonlight" generator. "Body heat was not

enough. So the nanites utilize nutrients in the stomach, intestines and fatty tissue. It powers them and provides raw materials for the change. It's much quicker."

"Makes the beasts hungry, too," Rankin said, replacing his spent shell. "Adds to the effect."

"This is great," Philby remarked, stepping to the bars. "A lot better than the robot werewolves." He turned to the project leader. "And it's real silver?"

"Yes," Rankin replied.

"Nanites will recognize silver if it enters the body," Krantz said. "They'll repair damage from a regular bullet immediately."

"Like the vamps with a wooden stake and garlic," Rankin added.

Philby moved to the bat wing doors and looked over the boardwalk, the partially-built saloon opposite and the hotel further on. There were several other frames erected for what would complete Full Moon Hill. "And you're confident about the theme, Rankin? Hunting werewolves in the Old West?"

"Feedback cards and VIP polling showed demand for the Old West," Rankin said. "Plus, I can always swap with Charlie Pak's team—I'll use the Eastern Europe set and he'll run vamp hunts here."

"And the 1950's suburban set that's being built," Krantz added. "It's the primary set for the zombies, but we could run hunts there until the zombies are ready. It would be like those 1950s movies."

"Caroline tells me the zombie nanites will be ready on time," Philby said, "but I like the idea."

"About time," Krantz said. "Her specs don't even include skeletal manipulations and she's three weeks behind."

Philby and Rankin shared a quick smile. The scientists were so competitive in their quest to turn humans into monsters using the microscopic machines.

"What do you think, boss?", Rankin asked.

"Failsafe testing?"

Rankin looked to Krantz to answer.

"Hundred percent," Krantz said. "After twelve hours or if they get outside the boundaries of the set, a coma's induced, just like the vamps. We can then effect a reversion."

"And we're still on for an April launch?", Philby asked.

"Depends on recruitment," Rankin answered.

"Texas and Florida prison systems are onboard," Philby said, "and California, Arizona and Utah are interested. New York sees it as a great way to deal with overcrowding. And there's always Gitmo. Anything else?"

"Just need your approval on the last phase's funding."

"You have it."

Krantz looked at Rankin, beaming.

"But I think I would like to see the transformation one more time," Philby added.

"Certainly," Krantz said, stepping to the moonlight generator. He aimed its lens toward another cell. Its occupant, a convicted carjacker who had no idea what to expect when he agreed to participate in a "science experiment" in exchange for early parole, screamed before the light was turned on. •

I'd heard rumours of a banjo built with a brake drum for a pot, and thought it was just a legend, but this may well have been the real thing.

Pest Control

Kate Riedel

It was a dark and stormy night, and I did not appreciate being out in it.

It wasn't so bad while we were still in the car, although I could have done without Colly hugging his mandolin and mumbling about the good Lord willing and the creek don't rise, and how he'd rather be in some dark hollow. Well, he would be, soon; if this wasn't the countryside for dark hollows, I didn't know what was, and in this weather, the creek was altogether too likely to rise.

Colly Waschbar is the best mando player I've ever encountered in my career (although I've heard better singers). His ability is fully worthy of the Gibson F-5 he plays, the same model Bill Monroe played.

I once made the mistake of asking him how he got his hands on it. "I stole it," he answered, so casually that I didn't ask any more.

He drank too much, didn't get along with anyone, and never got enough sleep, always had dark circles under his eyes and a five-o'clock shadow. Some people might call him scrappy, others feisty. I called him something else, but to myself.

When an instrumentalist reaches Colly's level he shouldn't need an agent, impresario, manager, someone like me, except for the business end of things, because word gets around, bands come to him, he has

more sessions than he can handle. But Colly needed me.

I didn't need him at all. I'd placed him with I don't know how many up-and-coming bluegrass bands, jazz combos, roots (what used to be called folk) groups, but they'd all up and went without him, despite him being the best instrumentalist in all of them, because nobody could stand him.

Plus you couldn't let him anywhere near your fridge. And, as one guitarist complained to me, "It's not that he can't hold his liquor, Dan, it's that he holds everybody else's, too."

But he was *good*.

So we tried a solo career. It flopped. For one thing, while he could carry a tune his voice was nothing to write home about, grating without being distinctive. Worse, with no band members on whom to take out his bad temper, he took it out on the management, or on the audience.

So when he told me he'd found a banjo player who wanted to work with him, I had hopes. "Bring him over this evening," I said.

"Her," he said.

"Her, then," I said, my hopes going down a little.

They didn't rise noticeably when she came in the door, carrying her banjo in what looked like a packing case.

"Bébé Laveur," Colly introduced her.

I expected a French-Canadian accent, but her French was more of the "pardon my French" variety, which is why I don't include a lot of her conversation in this account. She was short and broad: broad face, broad hips, although she was not fat, and she moved with a swaying, muscular grace. She had black hair in a mohawk, a narrow nose, and small dark eyes with an ominously intelligent glitter.

"Got anything to eat?" Colly asked, and without waiting for an answer headed for the kitchen.

I finally herded them away from the remains of my week's groceries, and Bébé opened her packing case.

I'd heard rumours of a banjo built with a brake drum for a pot, and thought it was just a legend, but this may well have been the real thing.

Imagine Janis Joplin with a banjo.

On the other hand, don't.

But, although she and Colly obviously hadn't played together much, there was chemistry.

By midnight they were still going strong; it took the rest of my strength to get them out the door. "That's quite the banjo," I said as she finally put it back in its case. "That head doesn't look like Mylar. It's not skin, is it?"

"Yup," she said with a grin. "That's Uncle George. Got hit by a car, and we didn't want to waste him."

Right. Okay.

But on the other hand, this was one instrumentalist with whom Colly was unlikely to pick any serious fights; she'd mop the floor with him.

And maybe use his skin for her next banjo head.

I emptied my ash trays, then took a look in the kitchen and decided I couldn't face it without some sleep.

I found them practice space. They scrapped all the time while they used it, over songs, over arrangements, over who got the last beer in the fridge. Once Colly turned up with a nice four-line set of scratches on his face, quite ugly, that left scars because he refused to have a doctor look at them.

I always took a bath after I'd met with them, because once I'd caught her picking a flea off herself. She'd only grinned and crushed it between her nails.

But if Colly knew about it, it didn't bother him. And they got better. I arranged studio time for a demo.

They started off recording "Hell Among the Yearlings". They never finished it.

It began with a disagreement about who would lead off, and ended with Bébé bringing her banjo down on Colly's head. Strings snapped, the head split, the bridge flew across the room, and Colly dropped like a stone. Bébé stayed only long enough to retrieve the bridge.

Colly should have been dead.

"That banjo weighs at least twelve pounds and the pot is solid steel," I said as he sat up and checked his F-5 for damage. But only after he threw up did Colly agree to let me take him to the emergency ward.

Apparently the drum-like head had deflected the worst of the blow, sort of bounced the thing off Colly's skull before splitting, but he still had a sizeable lump and a couple of gashes from the tension

brackets.

"You must have a very hard head," the doctor said, "and more than your share of luck."

The doctor made Colly stay overnight for observation. When I went back the next day he'd checked himself out, and when I went to his room he refused to let me in.

I figured if he had the strength to slam the door in my face he was on the road to recovery.

I didn't hear from him for a long time, and I wasn't all that sorry. No one likes to work with temperamental artists, and the Colly-Bébé duo had moved past temperament into the realm of psychopathy. Colly could be Bill Monroe, Sam Bush, Ricky Skaggs, Andrew Collins and Dawg rolled into one, and no way would I ever touch him again. As for Bébé—well, if Alison Brown, Lynn Morris, Chris Quinn and Earl Scruggs himself had shown up to plead on her behalf I would not have listened.

But when Colly turned up at my door late that October afternoon I have to admit I was glad to see he was still alive.

For about two minutes.

"I've found her," he said, dropping his mandolin case and backpack on the floor and himself on my couch.

"Well, don't come to me about it," I said. "I don't handle psychopathic wolverines."

"She's not a wolverine," he said and, when I didn't answer: "Look, Dan, I've got to get something going. I'm stony. And I've been kicked out of my room."

I looked at the mandolin case, and I looked at the backpack beside it, and I had a horrible vision of what my place would look like after one night with Colly in residence.

"Where is she?" I asked.

He pulled out a grubby and much folded piece of paper. It was a flyer announcing the Raton Laveurs, "Friday Nights at the—" unfortunately the name of the pub or tavern or whatever was torn away, but the name of the town remained, a very small town a good ways to the north.

"That's where she said she was from," Colly said. "She told me her brothers and a couple cousins had a band that played locally. She'd go back there. She always said the city was too tough for her."

I tried to imagine any place too tough for Bébé. "That flyer looks pretty old," I said.

"I'm sure they still play there. We've got to get up there."

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

"Well, I don't have a car, and it's not on any bus route. We've got to get up there tonight."

"Tonight!"

"Well, it's Friday."

"Do you think I have nothing better to do on a Friday night? I've got a concert I have to be at tonight."

"Then can I stay here? Have anything to eat? How about a beer?"

So I made a few phone calls and there we were, driving through the worst kind of October day, dreary, grey, the only leaves left dead brown. And as afternoon faded into evening and then night, on more and more remote country roads, it started to rain.

The sullen drizzle was gradually whipped by a rising wind into a downpour, slashing against the windshield faster than the wipers could take it off.

"I'm turning back," I said.

"You can't," said Colly, "we're almost there."

"Well, I'm going to pull over for awhile."

"The turn off is right here."

Why I listened to him I don't know. The turn off was the road to hell, unpaved and overhung with trees, which did nothing to break the storm but instead made it worse, plastering the windshield with brown leaves.

"I'm not going any further," I said, and I wasn't, because as I said it the car skidded in leaves and mud, right off the road and into a ditch that was running with water. I stepped into it when I got out of the car.

Colly, with his mandolin in its case in one hand, backpack in the other, squeezed out the passenger side.

"Put that back and help me push," I said. But it was hopeless.

I pulled out my cell phone. I should have known. Whether from weak batteries, the weather, or Murphy's Law, it was unavoidably and inevitably dead.

"Let's get back in the car, at least we'll have a heater," I said. Also I badly wanted a cigarette. But Colly skipped across the stream of running water and onto the road.

"It's right here!" he said.

"I don't see any pub," I said.

"No. This is where she lives!" He was hugging a battered mailbox with the name "Laveur" painted on it in straggling letters.

"I don't see any house, either."

"The driveway's right here. We can go up to the house and wait for them." And he headed into the woods. Into the dark.

Driveway was not the way to describe it; path would have been a compliment. I slipped and slid on mud and leaves, tripped over roots and fallen branches and got tangled in clumps of weeds, most of them prickly. At least now we had illumination: lightning, almost simultaneous with thunder. All I need now, I thought, as I was left once more in the dark, is to get struck by lightning.

The next flash of lightning revealed the house.

"Colly," I said, as we came up onto a sagging verandah booby-trapped with rotten boards, and found a screen door hanging on a hinge. "Colly, no one lives here."

Even Colly had to admit it looked that way.

"At least we can get out of the rain," he said.

He tried the door and it opened, scraping across the floor of a tiny hall. Next to the hall was a big room, and another flash of lightning revealed a fireplace and a pile of wood beside it.

By feel, when there was no lightning to help, I managed to lay a fire, and, with leaves that had blown across the floor as tinder, managed to light it. That was a bit of a risk (who knew what might be nesting in the chimney) but not so much of a risk as you might think, as I had felt what seemed to be fairly fresh ashes when I laid the fire. And the chimney drew, except for an occasional back-draft from a particularly strong blast of wind.

Once the fire was lit, I could see the room itself — it contained a mattress and a cheap battered coffee table, probably hauled in by a bunch of local kids, the same ones who had used the fireplace. Trash of all kinds. Piles of leaves in the corners. And, now that I had time to notice, the place didn't smell very good.

Colly ripped open his backpack and pulled out what I assumed were all his worldly goods besides his mandolin — a cheap blanket and a couple of changes of clothes, and a mess of spare strings and picks.

I went to see if there was anything useful in the back room. I barely

had time to notice that it was a kitchen, when I heard a thump and another voice behind me.

“How many times have I told you damn kids—”

I turned back into the front room. Beside the fireplace, hands on her hips, stood a woman of (let’s be kind) indeterminate age, fat, (okay, let’s be honest) with a fright-wig of salt-and-pepper hair, wearing a grey sweat-suit streaked with soot, and smelling more than a little rank, even in competition with the smell of that room.

Colly stood open-mouthed with his empty backpack dangling from his fingers, staring at her as if she had just come down the chimney. But her voice was familiar, and so were her eyes.

“Oh,” she said, “You’re the one my girl was telling me about. She says you can really play that thing. Okay, then, let’s hear you.” (You can put in the expletives for yourself.)

Colly slowly dropped the backpack, took out his mandolin, checked the tuning, and launched into his version of “Black Mountain Rag” that always ended up with the audience—when he could get one—pounding the tables and cheering.

“Not bad,” she said as he ended with a defiant tag. “Of course, Rupe might have something to say about it. Watch out for him, he thinks he owns the band—and Bébé.”

I tried to imagine anyone owning Bébé, and couldn’t.

She vanished into a back room and returned with a six-pack. “Here,” she said, tossing it to Colly. “Sorry there’s nothing to eat. Those boys—not to mention Bébé—they never leave a scrap. You boys make yourselves at home while I go rustle up some grub.” She waddled into the back room and I heard a creak and then a door slammed in the wind.

“Well,” I said after a minute, “they say if you want to know what a girl’s going to turn into, take a look at her mother.”

“Shut up,” said Colly.

Colly changed to the skin. My jacket had kept me fairly dry above, but I peeled off my soaked pants, socks and shoes, wrapped the blanket around my waist and spread our clothes to dry in front of the fire. Colly held out a can of beer. I looked at the label and declined. I don’t see why local microbreweries have to be inventive in their names to the point of putting off the customers.

After some hesitation, but what the heck, I’d be taking a bath as

soon as I got home, I settled down on the mattress and finally had my cigarette, while Colly, with his mandolin and the remains of the six-pack, scrunched down in one of the piles of leaves. I fell asleep to the sound of the house creaking with every blast of wind, rain on the windows, and Colly playing variations on "Little Maggie."

I woke to the smell of pizza and Colly still playing "Little Maggie."

No, not Colly. Good, really good. But not Colly.

I remembered where I was and reached out and snaked my pants toward me and, as I got a look at the people who I assumed used this house regularly, I thought: Oh God, we're in for it.

They looked like refugees from "Deliverance".

Bébé herself squatted next to the fireplace, her banjo beside her.

Next to Bébé, a larger guy, heavy all-round, maybe more benign-looking than the rest (if you take it as all relative) stood beside an old-fashioned galvanized wash tub, upended, with a piece of pipe welded to it and wire taut between the tub and the top of the pipe. He occasionally thumped a note or two from it, with an accuracy and resonance that would have made any bass player envious. Another guy, who might have been twin brother to the wash tub player, sat cross-legged on the floor with his guitar on his lap. A grizzled guy cradled a fiddle on his beer belly, looking between Colly and the guy playing the mandolin, who had to be the Rupe to whom Bébé's mother had referred.

And that was my introduction to the Raton Laveurs.

Colly was standing, legs apart, mandolin at the ready, listening to, watching the player, for technique, maybe, although it may have been for safety's sake. This guy was scraggly at the top, heavy at the bottom, and the meanest looking guy I'd ever seen, and I've seen a lot, including Colly.

But he was good. Damn good.

There was an open box of pizza on the coffee table. It was already half-gone, but I found a piece that looked slightly less mangled than the rest, and had my long-delayed supper.

I should have been worrying about the musicians I'd abandoned back in the city, wondering how they were getting on and if the recording company reps had turned up at the concert as they'd promised. But I'm afraid I was too busy listening to Rupe playing, watching Colly watching him, picking out the finer points as well as the flaws, so

absorbed I'd finished my first slice of pizza and started another one before I realized I was doing it.

Rupe finished with the same flourish Colly had used earlier to end "Black Mountain Rag", and bared his teeth in challenge.

Colly stepped forward, bent over his mandolin, and replayed the flourish, then again an octave up.

Then, as he moved back into "Little Maggie" in a way I'd never heard it before, he lifted his head and grinned back at Rupe.

I'd never realized before just how many teeth Colly had.

There have been a lot of musical contests in books and songs and movies—the duelling banjos in "Deliverance" comes first to mind, of course (and yes, I know the actor was miming clawhammer while the soundtrack was playing bluegrass). Then there's Charlie Daniel's "Devil Went Down to Georgia" and the bagpipe contest between Alan Breck and Robin Oig in *Kidnapped*, and Stephen Vincent Benet's "Mountain Whippoorwill", and I suppose they're all about as right as you can get it without having the music right there and live, making you jump up and cheer and clap and stomp your feet before you know you're doing it.

The music has a life of its own, and the musician and, I think, maybe even the instrument, feel it the way no one else does. I've heard it over and over again from all kinds of musicians, about that high that keeps you going when you ought to be dropping in your tracks. I've seen it, but not felt it. People like me, who can play a few instruments just well enough to know when you're hearing someone really good, we can guess at it, but that's all.

Rupe moved in on the second verse, and he could keep up all right, but now he was just playing with his hands and fingers, and tension was slowly creeping into his right wrist. But Colly was playing with his heart and belly, his right hand moving so fast and loose it blurred, while the fingers of his left hand travelled calmly up and down the neck like a separate entity.

The music came racketing off that F-5 like a dog fox challenging another dog fox, cracking out the high notes like lightning. It's always surprised me that the mandolin, a seemingly feminine instrument, is usually played by men, and I don't think it's just because it was Bill Monroe's instrument and Bill Monroe was about as alpha male as you can get. I think it's because, sweet as it can sound, at heart it's an

aggressive little beast.

Benet could write about Hell broke loose in Georgia, and Daniels sing about "I told you once, you son-of-a-bitch, I'm the best that's ever been," and Stevenson be ravished by grace notes, but they give only a faint echo of what the music does to you, and if that's all they can do, how can I do even as much?

Rupe's baby finger, always the weak point, hit a fret at the wrong angle, the note buzzed, and the tune went flat. Colly ended on a riff of high notes, and we were all up and stomping as he played and sang a reprise of "Go 'way, go 'way, little Maggie, go do the best you can," with Bébé jumping up to join him on the banjo, and even his voice was just right this time.

I didn't see Colly move forward, but I did see Rupe back up. This wasn't going to be a matter of Alan Breck saving, "It would go against my heart to haggle a man who can play the pipes like you!" The devil wasn't going to place the gold fiddle in Johnny's hands, because it was Colly who was the devil, and Rupe knew it.

The fiddler was tuned up and ready to go when Colly played a vamp and the rest of the band swung in behind him. Colly set the pace, the guitarist anchored him, the bassist walked a line and sang a verse about a man with a double chin who played with skill on the violin, and the fiddler proved the truth of the line with an absolutely mind-blowing fiddle break, giving over to Bébé's banjo and coming back in with a reprise before Colly closed it with shave-and-a-haircut. Damn, they were good, giving new life to an old chestnut of a tune, and Colly might have been playing with them his whole life.

"Hey!" said Bébé. "We forgot to give Rupe a break!"

She may have already noticed that Rupe was no longer in the room. Too bad. He'd been good. But it was no longer his band.

"I see you got a new head for your banjo," I said to her as she popped open a can of beer at the end of the song.

"Yup!" she said, taking a swig. "My bro Joe got caught in the neighbour's sweetcorn patch. Rick got a new set of strings out of him, too. Sound pretty good, don't they?" I still didn't think much of her sense of humour, but she wasn't interested anyway. And whatever the strings were made of, there was no question the fiddler was good, and I told him so while he was refreshing himself with some of that god-awful beer.

"I've never heard 'Turkey in the Straw' played like that before," I said.

He seemed puzzled, then said, "Oh. We call that one 'Old Zip Coon'."

"Isn't that a little, uh, um..." While I hesitated, wondering if he'd ever heard the words "politically correct" before, he tossed off the rest of the can, said, "Doesn't bother us," and picked up his fiddle.

They played "Gold Rush", they played "Arkansas Traveller", they played "Duncan and Brady" and "In the Jail House Now." They played "Hell Among the Yearlings." I don't know how late they played. Bébé and Colly were back-to-back singing about how their love was just a hit-and-run affair, when I realized the rain had stopped. I looked around at the state the rest of them were in, and decided to follow Rupe's example.

The sky was pearly grey at the horizon. The flood in the ditch was already receding. Maybe that bunch back there could help me push the car back up on the road come morning. I climbed in, locked the doors, smoked another cigarette, and then put back the seat down and went to sleep.

• • •

I ended up calling a tow truck; must have been the weather interfering with my cell phone the night before.

I made it back to the city in plenty of time to meet with the recording company rep, who was enthusiastic about the band whose concert I had missed the night before.

He should have seen the band I was with the night before...

But I didn't say that.

Okay, I'm leaving stuff out here. You would too. But there's no point in giving you the story so far, and then cheating you of the ending.

So let me go back to going to sleep in the car, and then waking up.

• • •

It was well after sunrise, under a cold blue sky, when I dragged myself out of the car and slogged back to the house which looked, if

possible, even worse in daylight. I didn't really expect anyone to be awake, but Colly owed me; it wouldn't hurt him to be woke up, and he could handle the rest of them.

Silence in the hall.

Snores from the room where we'd been the night before. I stepped in as quietly as possible.

The fire had long gone out. Empty and crushed beer cans and torn pizza boxes were scattered on the floor, the coffee table was turned on its side. The smell was worse than ever—I told myself it was the stale beer. The instruments, however, had been carefully stowed in the cleanest corner.

I turned around, slowly, my eyes adjusting to the dim light from the filthy windows.

The mattress, along with a lot of the dead leaves, had been shoved into the corner by the fireplace, and they were all piled up on it.

That was when I went back and tried my phone, discovered it was working again, and called for a tow truck.

I finished my last cigarette and waited for the tow truck, while an old chestnut of a tune ran unbidden through my head—

*Well, "Old Zip Coon" he played all day
'Til all the neighbours ran away,
So they shipped him off to a foreign shore
Where the natives never heard that tune before...*

The car was undamaged, except for being dirty, and ran just fine. I followed the tow truck back to the highway.

As I turned off the gravel I saw a dead raccoon by the side of the road.

Poor Rupe, I thought. Wonder if his skin will top a banjo, or maybe a drum; if his guts will string a violin?

He'd been good, but Colly was better.

Of course, it might not have been Rupe. It could have been any old raccoon that had got unlucky.

Or it might have been Rupe.

They say raccoons are on the whole solitary, but I understand sometimes they winter together...

I think it was about then that my mind began to adjust to what the pale October light had revealed in that corner. That Colly had finally found his place in the world. That pile of raccoons—four of them—

with Colly cuddled in the middle of them, one arm around his mandolin in its case, the other around the only female raccoon—I assume Mama had gone back up the chimney—and a sweet smile on his face as he snored gently.

Back when there were still wolves, a lot of them, enough to assume importance in the human scheme of things, some of us occasionally straddled the line. Wolves might have four feet, or they might, some of them, sometimes, have two. Humans, vice-versa.

Well, wolves, on the whole, no longer bother city folk, except to make us feel guilty now and then. But the raccoons are still here, and if you think raccoons aren't waiting in line to take over the role of dominant mammal once humans bite the dust, you've never had them setting up housekeeping in your attic.

Maybe those dark circles around Colly's eyes weren't from lack of sleep after all. Maybe they were just...natural. And he already had all the right habits.

The female raccoon opened one eye, lifted her lip in a snarl—or it might have been a grin—scratched herself, and went back to sleep.

That was the last I saw of Colly and Bébé.

If the Raton Laveurs—technically, I suppose, it should be *Ratons Laveur*, but try teaching grammar, French or English, to a raccoon—ever turn up and ask me to represent them, I'll turn them down flat.

But if you ever get a chance to hear them, they put on quite a show. Only it's up to you whether or not you want to try the beer they supply. I prefer to believe it's called Raccoon Piss because that's what it makes them do. You can decide for yourself. •

Dedicated to the Foggy Hogtown Boys and their musical colleagues, who, to the best of my knowledge, resemble the band in this story only in skill, and who are always a medicine against melancholy. - Kate Riedel

Lady of the Banjo: A Chat with Featured Author Kate Riedel

Robertta Laurie

When she was three, Sandra Kathryn Riedel stopped answering to the name Sandy. She thought she was being teased for playing in the sand box. So her dad said, "Will you answer if we call you Kate?" Since then she has been Kate and sometimes Sandra, but never Sandy.

The youngest of six girls, Kate Riedel grew up on a Minnesota farm. She moved to Canada in 1971 where she began a varied assortment of professions:

- Office temp
- Professional librarian
- Administration assistant for the Book and Periodical Publishing Counsel
- Free-lance editor
- Telepersonal typist ("swf, spontaneous, spiritual but not religious, attractive..." You get the idea.)
- Second hand bookstore clerk

Today—for "walking around money"—Kate writes speculative fiction and mends books.

Kate's education is nearly as eclectic as her work history:

- Art and journalism at Mankato State College
- Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario
- Book publishing at Centennial College
- Courses in book mending through the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild

Kate is a charming lady, sweetly self-deprecating and well-spoken. She is both witty and articulate, a true storyteller.

• • •

*"I never feel like I'm doing or saying the right thing.
But I muddle along anyway."*
- Kate Riedel

• • •

On Spec: Why did you start writing?

Kate: I'm not sure. I might have been taking a book-publishing course at the time and decided I'd rather write my own stories than edit other people's.

On Spec: What do you remember about getting your first piece published?

Kate: My first professionally published fiction piece was *Therapy* in *On Spec* (Summer 1994). I danced around the apartment and told the cat all about it.

On Spec: What attracts you to speculative fiction?

Kate: I've always liked mythology and fairy tales and ghost stories. I've always felt there was something just out of reach, just under the surface. I've never had a psychic or mystical experience, but real life has a kind of magical undercurrent to it. There's something magical about just living.

On Spec: Do you write in other genres?

Kate: I started out with nonfiction. I wrote a lot about plants. One of my interests is common plants: weeds. It makes gardening pretty tough. I have to look at each weed and say, "You're not an endangered species. You have to go." I've always found common plants interesting. They have complicated histories. Just about every weed you see growing up out of the sidewalk has been used medicinally at one time or another. A lot of my non-fiction articles were about that. It's a narrow topic. No one is going to buy many articles about weeds, but it's a topic that fits well into fantasy writing.

On Spec: Who are your favorite writers?

Kate: Shirley Jackson, definitely. Rex Stout—especially his later Nero Wolfe novels. He has a very clean style. Robert Louis Stevenson and Samuel Johnson. Samuel Johnson isn't nearly as stuffy as most people think. I also love a good mystery, but I can't write them.

• • •

Kate's top five books:

1. *True Grit* by Charles Portis: "I don't care for Portis as a whole, but *True Grit* is one of the few novels I wish I'd written myself."
2. *The October Country* by Ray Bradbury: "Bradbury is up there among my favorite writers."
3. *The life and times of archy and mehitabel* by Don Marquis (a collection of his columns from the New York Sun during the 20s and 30s).
4. *We've Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson. (Also *Sundial* and *The House on Haunted Hill*).
5. Number five is a tie between *Boswell's Life of Johnson* by James Boswell and *Mistress Masham's Repose* by T. H. White.

• • •

On Spec: What is your greatest strength as a writer?

Kate: I'm still willing to listen to suggestions from an editor, even when it hurts. Even when I get a terrible rejection letter, I try to look at it and see if they are right about anything. They aren't always, but quite frequently, they are. That's the touchy point. Recognizing when they're right and when you're right and revising accordingly.

On Spec: Are you writing something now?

Kate: It's a short story. I'll have to wait to get the first draft done to see how it goes. I very rarely have a story that just takes off.

• • •

"I don't think about writing a lot. I just occasionally do it."

- Kate Riedel

• • •

On Spec: Music plays a part in many of your stories. It plays a major role in *Pest Control*. Why do you keep coming back to it?

Kate: I'm old enough that I'm at the edge of the era when you were expected to be able to do something like play the piano. My parents bought me my guitar and my harmonica. My sisters and I, we always had music lessons, and I've always had a fascination for the feel of music. I'm not particularly musical. It's just something that was natural to all of us. It might be part of being Methodist.

On Spec: You play the banjo.

Kate: I don't play it very well though. I love bluegrass music. I love the sound and the tradition. In a bluegrass band, every musician must be ready to play a solo part. It's a very democratic form of music. And that means that everybody has to be really good. There is a local group that I go to hear whenever I can.

• • •

Kate's favourite bluegrass bands are:

1. The Foggy Hogtown Boys
2. The Del McCoury Band
3. Blue Grass Gospel Project

• • •

"I play the banjo very badly, but I enjoy hearing it played well."

- Kate Riedel

• • •

On Spec: Do you write regularly?

Kate: I try to keep something going all the time, but the ideas aren't always there. I've tried setting up a writing schedule, but it never lasts. There's always some errand that needs to be run. If I have something that's going well, I'll write every day 'til it's done. Until it gets going though, I might write an hour a day or an hour a week. I wish I could have a schedule, but I just don't.

On Spec: What is your greatest writing achievement?

Kate: Just getting published. I'm not sure what my best story is. *Chad* (*On Spec*, Spring 1997) has been published three times and seems to be the one that strikes a chord with people of a certain age. But the ones I feel most strongly about are *The Baby Sitter* (*On Spec*), *The Darbies* (*Realms of Fantasy*), ... *And a Pony* (*On Spec*) and *The Summer of Lucy* (upcoming in *Realms of Fantasy*).

On Spec: Where do you think your writing will go in the future?

Kate: Slogging along. Looking (and sometimes waiting) for ideas. Hammering away at the stories that come out of them and hoping my husband doesn't get run over by a truck because I depend on him for editing. Sometimes I'd love to just quit writing, but it's the only thing I'm the least good at, and my Protestant work ethic won't let me waste that. (And I do so like seeing my by-line in print.) I don't expect to do the novel thing, but I wouldn't mind getting a collection of short stories published. I may take to beating on the doors of publishers with that idea next year.

• • •

"Pest control, that one was fun to write."

- Kate Riedel

• • •

On Spec: You mend books. You must see some very old and rare books.

Kate: Just today, I finished putting back together a first edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and I have to say that the binding was rather like the author. Not too stable. The paper on the cover was crumbling under my fingers. I've occasionally thought, "There's a series in here." We have an amateur detective or amateur psychic who mends books and something comes out of the books that leads to various adventures, but the adventures haven't materialized yet. Something may come out of it some day.

On Spec: Why did you start mending books?

Kate: One day I said to my husband, “I’d like that book binding course for Christmas.” And he said, “Okay, if you eventually bind my Oxford Greek Dictionary in leather.” I haven’t done it yet. It’s a bloody big book, and he wants it bound in two volumes. He still hasn’t decided where it’s to be divided, and I don’t read Greek. There’s a story behind that. He spent a year at the University of California at Berkeley in Classic Studies. When he came back to Canada he had this big Greek dictionary. Going through customs, the customs people looked at it and thought, “Nobody actually has a Greek dictionary because they read Greek. He must be smuggling drugs.” So they ripped off the cover. It’s been like that ever since. But I think by next year some time, it will be in two parts with a nice leather cover. I hope.

• • •

“I’m not so sure writing is interesting. It all goes on in your head.”

- Kate Riedel

• • •

On Spec: Where do you get the inspiration for your stories?

Kate: A lot of it is bits and pieces from life. Things that happened in my childhood. Things I remember my sisters telling me. Things I remember my parents telling me. Usually how a story starts out bears no resemblance to how it ends up. I once had a story that started out set in Nelson’s navy and ended up set in a cheap rooming house in Toronto. My stories generally start from small things, things I know. They evolve from there. Agatha Christie once said, “You must never tell people who ask that you get your stories from Mark’s and Spencer.” So I won’t tell you that. If anything, I get them at the St. Lawrence Market.

• • •

Kate considers shape shifting “rather fun”. She has two raccoons living under an old playhouse at the back of her house in Etobicoke, Ontario. “I don’t mind as long as the neighbors don’t complain. It’s fun to find they’ve been dancing in the birdbath.” So far there have been no reports of bluegrass music coming from the playhouse at night. •



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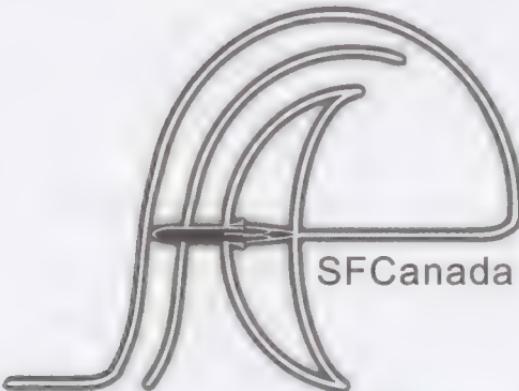


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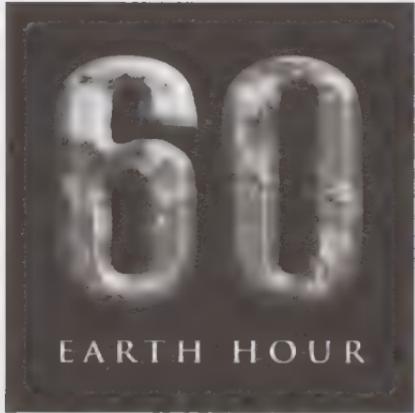
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Young Canadian Writers Wanted!

On Spec is pleased to announce a **Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Story Contest for young Canadian writers**. This is a great opportunity for those preparing for a career in writing, and for those who enjoy writing fiction for pleasure. Approximately **10 stories** will be chosen for publication (winners will be notified in July 2008 and published in *On Spec's Fall 2008* issue):

Eligibility & Submission Guidelines:

- **Canadian** writers between the ages of **15-23 years** are invited to submit (winners will be chosen from 15-18 and 19-23 age groups)
- **Categories:** Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Urban Fantasy, Magic Realism or any other aspect of Speculative Fiction.
- Submissions are to be up to a **maximum of 6,000** words.
- Writers may submit multiple stories
- **Poetry** submissions will be considered for publication, but will *not* be included in the competition.
- **Submissions should include** your name, address, city, province, postal code, telephone number (including area code), an email address, and **your age** (see address below)
- **Teachers** wishing to submit group class assignments may do so by prior arrangement with ON SPEC editors.
- **Deadline for submissions is May 31, 2008**

Awards Categories:

- 1st place winners in each age group will receive \$250.00, and original artwork illustrating their stories will be featured on the covers
- 2nd and 3rd place winners will receive an Honorable Mention certificate, as well as *On Spec's* usual story payment rate.
- All other submissions chosen for publication will receive *On Spec's* usual story payment rate (payment varies by total word count).

Mail typed submissions to:

On Spec
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* Hand-written or emailed submissions will *not* be accepted!

See *On Spec's* website at **www.onspec.ca** for full Guidelines.



Anticipation

The 67th World Science Fiction Convention

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"Worldcon" is a service mark of the World Science Fiction Society, an unincorporated literary society.

about our contributors

Bruce Barber is co-author (as “Bevan Amberhill”) of two mystery novels published by The Mercury Press, *The Bloody Man* (1993) and *The Running Girl* (1996), and sole author of the third book in the series, *Downstage Dead* (Pasdeloup Press, 2007). His short fiction has appeared in various publications, including *On Spec*, *Neo-Opsis*, *Descant*, *StoryTeller*, and *The New Quarterly*. He is also a freelance editor and has worked as a publishing assistant with several small literary presses in his home town of Stratford, Ontario. This is his fourth appearance in *On Spec*.

Sarah Carless studies at the University of Waterloo, where she is in Honours Arts, working towards a degree in Rhetoric and Professional Writing, and lives off-campus with family, a rose garden, and a big dog which has entirely too much hair. Although she has met with some small success with a few of her short scripts produced by local theatre, *Daystar* is her first published work.

Nancy Chenier has been living in Vancouver with her husband, Marcel. Her work has appeared in *ElectricSpec*, *Mytholog* as well as *OnSpec*. When not subverting mainstream narratives, she works as a freelance everything.

Steve Fahnestalk has been reading and writing SF for half a century plus. He hopes to continue same well into the next century, atoning for his sins along the way. He is married to the much lovelier and more talented Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk. They now live with their dyslexic cat, Miss Mutt (AKA "Booboo", "Monster", "Youlittleshit", etc.), in Vancouver proper for the first time in a decade.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk has been a professional illustrator and cartoonist for almost 30 years. Her work has appeared in publications across the U.S. and Canada and she is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Aurora Award for artistic achievement. Lynne has been an Art Director for various art agencies, printing firms and magazines including *On Spec*. She works primarily in colored pencil and terms her artwork “quality art with a smile”. Lynne was most recently Artist Guest of Honour for V-con 31 where she was responsible for the now infamous Really Silly Hat, Slide Show and “is that really a didgeridoo

and why are there sharks in the punch bowl?" Party. Lynne has been associated with the Canadian book industry since 1989. She currently works for Raincoast Book Dist. Ltd., the Canadian publisher of a little thing called Harry Potter. Lynne lives in Coquitlam, BC with her husband, the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk. They have one really intense cat, lots of books and a bunch of dead plants. She says she will learn how to do computer art any day now.

I.B. (Bunny) Iskov is the Founder of The Ontario Poetry Society. Her work has been published in several literary journals, magazines & anthologies including *QUILLS Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *Henry's Creature: Stories and Poems of The Automobile* (Black Moss Press) and in *Earle Birney: A Tribute* (Prism International). She is interested in publishing her full collection of poems.

Roberta Laurie won her first writing competition when she was 17, and she's been writing ever since. She has been published in three anthologies and is co-editing a fourth, *Snapshots of Stony Plain: A Writers' Landscape*, due to be released this year. Roberta has written for several magazines including *WestWord* and *Yoga Bridge* and volunteers for the literary magazine *Other Voices*. Currently she is writing and researching a book about the challenges facing the women of Malawi and other African countries. You can learn more about Roberta by visiting her website at www.creativewhispers.ca.

Matthew Moore was raised in small-town New England, a place rich with legends and ghost stories. A multiple-award winner for creative writing in high school, Matthew has returned to fiction writing after nearly a decade of professional business writing. He lives in Ottawa, Ontario with his wife and two beagles, where he is a project manager in the information technology field.

Gary L. Pierluigi was an ex-journalist and Social Services Worker who, in 1996, became a quadriplegic. He has been published in numerous Literary Journals, including *Queen's Quarterly*, *CV2*, and *Quills*. He was short listed for the 2006 CBC Literary Awards, and received an honourable mention in the Ontario Poetry Society's *Open*

Heart Contest. He currently has a poetry collection under review for possible publication, and is completing a book of short stories. He now writes full time.

Kate Riedel was born and raised in Minnesota, but is now a card-carrying Canadian and lives in Etobicoke, Ontario. Publication credits include *Not One of Us* (including the recent anthology, *Best of Not One of Us*), *On Spec, Realms of Fantasy, and Weird Tales*. Upcoming includes the anthologies *New Writings in the Fantastic* from Pendragon Press, *Tesseracts 11*, and *Bound is the Bewitching Lilith* from Popcorn Press, as well as the December *Realms of Fantasy*.

Angela Slatter is an Australian writer. *Pressina's Daughters* forms part of her Masters (Research) creative work. She was awarded a scholarship and began PhD studies in 2007. Her fiction has appeared in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Greg Wilson teaches computer science at the University of Toronto. His daughter Madeleine is the most beautiful baby in the world.

Saint James Harris Wood: Novelist, Poet, Musician, on the road with the most dissolute musicians Hollywood offered, picked up a heroin smoking habit which deposited him in prison. Hoping to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of his sons, he turned to writing and is now published in a dozen countries. He just finished his first novel, *The Narcotic Field Theory* and is looking for a publisher. He will write long crazy letters to anyone who writes to S.J. Wood T30027/ P.O. Box 8103, CMC East-5295/ San Luis Obispo, CA 93409.

David K. Yeh lives in Toronto where he works and teaches as an expressive arts therapist, and is managing editor of the zine *BOY-OBOY*. This is his second story to be published in *On Spec*. In his retirement, he'd like to tend a lemon tree by the sea.

in upcoming issues... Great new fiction by Marissa Gritter, Liz Shannon Miller, Jack Skillingshead, Hannah Strom-Martin, Jared Young, Elise C. Tobler, Steve Stanton and Saint James Harris Wood. New poetry by Steve Sneyd, Claire Litton, Michael Meyerhofer, Randy Schroeder, Evan Hazenberg, Desi Di Nardo, Leah Bobet and more.

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behind the scenes support

The continued success of On Spec is possible only because of the generous donation of time and assistance from wonderful people such as: Jane Bisbee and Paul Pearson of Alberta Community Development and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Don Bassie and the Made in Canada website, Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library, Donna McMahon, and our dedicated Editorial Board.



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